

MONSTER

BOOK *for* GIRLS



Edited by Terry Grimwood

The Monster Book for Girls

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Foreword by Terry Grimwood

While helping a friend clear out her parents' effects a while ago, I stumbled on a tatty old pre-war tome called *The Monster Book for Girls*. It was adorned with pictures of jolly school lasses wielding hockey sticks and was full of “thrilling adventure stories for girls”. I loved the title so much, I immediately sent out a call for new prose and poetry inspired by those five words. I couldn’t help myself, who could resist such a fantastic theme?

The guidelines were wide open, no specific genre required, no particular level of seriousness, be as dark as you like, as troubling as you like, as funny, as frightening, as wistful...

So here it is; a book of monster stories for girls, a girl story monster book, a book, monstrous, of girl stories, in other words an eclectic and intriguing meeting of literary minds and astounding interpretations.

I want to thank everyone who submitted work for this project, for their enthusiasm and their belief, and that includes those whose writing, sadly, didn’t make it into the final cut. Anthologies, I discovered, grow a soul of their own, a thread within a theme that bestows a sense of rightness on one particular story or poem, yet withholds it from another even though it may be an excellent piece of writing which richly deserves a home elsewhere.

A book of course, is not just the words inside, it has to have walls and a roof. I don’t entirely believe that hoary old adage that you can’t judge a book by its cover, and it certainly isn’t true in this case because the talented Mr Steve Upham has captured the energies and spirit of this volume perfectly with his fantastic artwork. So thanks Steve, you’ve done us proud.

Writing may be considered a solitary art, but it affects, and is affected by, those close to us. In my case, Jessica, my wife, who has been immensely supportive of the whole enterprise and whom I love deeply.

But enough from me, turn the page, set off on the journey and lose yourself for a while, but be careful because here be horror, humour, heartache, the dark, the deep, the distressing, the serious, the sad, the strange. And monsters all.

Young Ladies, Beware! By Allen Ashley

An introduction and some important advice for young gentlewomen from the Abbess Superior, Ms Petronella Flambard:

Welcome back, daughters, to another exciting academic year here at the Conventional Convent for Received Wisdom, trading as the Flambard Boarding School and Educational Institute for Girls of Means. I hope that we have a successful and inspiring year together.

Now that you are all a little older and - mostly due to the efforts of my wonderful teaching staff - somewhat wiser, it is time to alert you to a range of worries and, let's be francesca, dangers that you may encounter. Not likely, I hasten to add, within these walls but, girls will be girls and, depressingly, the local town shows no sign of regenerating into anything other than a necessary cess pit of lower order humanity and its ilk. Therefore, I need to warn you about the prevalence of Monsters.

There, I've said it. There are monsters hereabouts. In this way, we are no different to any other part of this ravaged country and, were I able, would relocate somewhere safer and more subdued. Alas, that option is closed. Hence, it is my duty as Abbess Superior, your spiritual guardian and loco parentis, to offer advice and information. Please, dear ladies, read these following paragraphs carefully. Learn the signs and devious ways of monsters. Preserve your heritage. Heed my words.

A - Animals - We all love animals. Many of you will have joined us from an agricultural and land-owning background so will have lived around animals all your life. Doubtless, the majority of you will have kept and nurtured pets at some point - perhaps a cute kitten, a playful puppy or a spotted gecko. There is no harm in this natural childish activity. When I say "Animals", girls, I am reminding you that animals are the templates for so many of our monsters. The monsters may be in the form of animals from the so-called Animal Kingdom - such as the sharp-toothed piranha or the tiger burning bright - but they may also be animals from the id and the psyche. In a phrase, "The beast in Man". For they are base, ignoble and savage. All

monsters are a menace to our society here at the Institute. There is no place for pets, herds or boyfriends.

V - Vampires - Some of you will have secretly read or viewed much of the modern and ancient vampire literature. I suspect that some of you may be smitten by the romance of their half-lives and nocturnal existence. Children, vampires are just bloodsuckers, not romantic at all. Tall, dark and handsome? Crouched, pale and nocturnal, more like. "Glorified rapists" Nurse Betty calls them and I have no hesitation in repeating her apt, poignant phrase. They want to suck you dry of much more than your life.

O - Ogres - Fairy tales are for your younger siblings. There is no enchanted prince hiding within the ugly shell. Kiss the frog and you will get warts and worse. Nor is it about the love of a good woman amending the character of the beastly bloke. Remember, dear pupils, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You are the beauties and you are the beholders. Should you happen to behold these ogres, you will not see beauty.

I - Idlers - Idleness is not attractive in man or monster. "Bring me my cooked meat, wench"? "Bring me my arrows of desire"? No, sire, raise yourself from your atrophied rump and see to your own needs and wants! Slavery was abolished long ago and that includes within this relationship, buster. The natural state of a man is to lounge... and expect the woman folk to attend to his apparent needs. Have no time for idlers.

D - Dunces - Yes, of course, women are not only the fairer sex as well as the more long-lived but we are also more intelligent than men and monsters. Look how girls have a head start in school and the boys never properly catch up. Nor should they. On the other hand, there are limits to what we should put up with in terms of the masculine tendency towards stupidity. As much as you may want and deserve to retain control of the purse and the home, and also steer your future family through the often choppy waters, a dim, unintelligent man is a bore and a burden. You can do better than the brute Neanderthal, arse scratching, cave dweller whose only utterances consist of grunts and bellows. Much better. Or live without him, as I do.

T - The Trickster - Be careful not to assume that every monster is identical in appearance and character. This trickster is a rare creature but prevalent enough to cause worry. One would not call it clever, but cunning is an appropriate adjective. The trickster is the hypnotic mesmerist who

makes you believe he is someone or something that in truth he is not. Below the level of out-and-out tricksters, there are as well many tongue-twisting charmers with the gift of the gab. Just like an oyster can fashion a pearl from an irritating grain of sand, these masculine cads will use the slightest fragment of truth to build air castles and tales of heroism. Do not be dazzled by his anecdotes and compliments. He has one thing in his mind just like the rest of them.

H - Hairy - Undoubtedly, hirsute gentlemen are closer to the ape or the bear or the wolf or wherever the dubious, atheistic scientists claim their species has descended from. Itchy, scratchy pelts hiding insects or microbes... I shiver even to relate such filthy countenances. Do not think facial hair regal or that combed manes on arms and legs are all right because they are reminiscent of a loved pet's coat. Ask yourself, sisters: What foulness is that full beard or chest hair hiding? As if it were not loathsome enough in and of itself! Beware, the unshaven man will abrade your skin rather than tickle your fancy.

E - Evil - Evil comes in many guises, even disguises, as I have already related in the paragraphs above. Experience has taught me to be aware of most of them. There is a non-curriculum aspect to all education and yours is to learn how to stay away from evil brutes, how to repel invaders and how to live a closeted life free from monsterhood. The alternative is unthinkable. So, don't think about it, that's a good child.

M - Monsters - Monsters and Minotaurs and Men and Mice. Sisters, they are all much of a muchness, really. The male may go through all those stages at different points of his life. He is simplistic in his needs and wants and yet not entirely simple. Else, how would he have survived all this time? Still, my advice to you can be boiled down into a clear mnemonic, which I shall shortly relate. Learn this, ladies; it could save your dignity.

From your loving Mother and Teacher,
Petronella

Animals.

Vampires.

Ogres.

Idlers.

Dunces.

Tricksters.

Hirsute.

Evil.

Monsters

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Real Celebrity by Rachel Kendall

She was the kind of woman mothers warn their sons about and wives refuse to name, preferring to spit out words like slut and gold-digger instead. She'd been the kind of girl who totters off the beaten path in high heels and fake furs, except this specimen had matured into a superstar who could own as many shoes and drape as many dead animals around her shoulders as she liked. After leaving home at sixteen and, some say, horizontally making her way through all and sundry to get to the top, she'd swung her woozy hips (the gateway) and fluttered her long lashes (the sweet nothings) right to the heart of Hollywood where Metro Goldwyn Meyer had catapulted her to stardom.

When Lily Amsel assented to the interview I was struck momentarily silent with awe and fear. Her first interview in forty years and she'd agreed to spill the beans to me, a writer for Real Celebrity Magazine who also happened to be her biggest fan. I'd seen her greatest film, the 1938 Von Sternberg-directed Last Train to Frankfurt so many times I could reel off the lines, strike the poses and mimic her every smouldering expression at will. As a teen I had died in front of the mirror over and over till I was able to impersonate the leading lady's death-throes to perfection.

I rang the bell again.

This had once obviously been a magnificent house, but time and weather had worn it down to a chapped and blistered replica of its former self. Many of the roof tiles were missing, the garden gate was hanging off its hinges and the fountain was empty but for a thin covering of green slime. It might actually have been Dorothy Gale's house post-hurricane, if it hadn't been slap-bang in the middle of Kent. To think Amsel had been here all along yet no one had been able to find her. She had faded so well into nothingness that she had almost ceased to exist altogether.

How had the most famous woman in the world managed to dive so deep into that inkwell of obscurity, without even making a splash? Lord Lucan and Richie Manic would achieve it in later years but Lily had actually

announced to the press that, at age 45, she was retiring from the public arena. People knew where she lived and the paparazzi had certainly tried their best to steal a grainy glimpse, but no one seemed able to even get close.

I was about to ring the bell again when I noticed a small mass of fur half-concealed behind an upturned plant pot by my feet. It looked wet and glistened slightly in an oozy congealed way. Cautiously I prodded it with a foot, afraid, but not really believing, that it might jump to life with snapping teeth and a drooling maw. But there was no movement. After some deliberation I slowly reached forward to touch it, but as I bent to the ground, the front door opened and I stood rigid, smiling stupidly.

The old woman at the door didn't seem to notice. She stood there looking at me and after almost a minute of silence I extended my hand.

"Hi," I said. "Gillian Stevens." I let my ignored offer of a polite handshake fall limp to my side. "Gill. I'm here to interview Lily Amsel."

"Ah yes. Pleased to meet you. Do come in."

As I stepped over the threshold I was pounded with the right hook of a disturbingly strong odour, but before I had time to separate the nuances of this particular bouquet, a sudden flurry of dogs appeared, like a noisy, annoying dust cloud. The smaller beasts bounced up and down at my feet while the larger labradors and retrievers got busy with their noses. One of the aforementioned bigger dogs went straight for my groin, burying its thick black nose into my crotch and refusing to submit, no matter how much I yanked, strangled and quietly swore at it. The old lady seemed mildly amused. I walked into the living room, dog still attached, and sought refuge in a low chair. Crossing my legs quickly I was able to smile at the miserable dog's defeat. But it didn't last long as, noticing the smear of brown around the edge of my shoe, it became obvious the dog had won this shitty battle. And with this came the realisation that the main spectrum of the foul odour was dog excrement. Perhaps I could detect some TCP, sweat, mints. But there was something else. Something rotten that made me feel decidedly uneasy.

"There will be blood," I whispered to him as he stood with tongue lolling and, as if in agreement of my thrown gauntlet, he let out a gentle fart.

I turned away from the dog's revolting effluvium and let my gaze roam the room. The inside of the house was in keeping with its exterior. Beneath a large window a chaise longue was spitting out its stuffing and the armchair

in which I'd found sanctuary was pock-marked with cigarette burns along the arm. Curtains were drawn but didn't quite meet and burnt-down candle stubs sat in pools of hardened wax. A large gilded bird cage hung suspended from the ceiling. Pictures hung rakishly in their frames and spider webs thick with dust decorated every corner. Above my head a chandelier barely lit up the room as most of its bulbs had blown and at my feet a large Oriental-style rug had various things mashed into its weave. Fruit, I thought and meat (dog food I hoped) and, were those splinters of egg shell or bone china? Or simply scrapings of bone? My mind was beginning to wield an unruly hammer around the collected memories of the horror films of my youth.

"Gin?" She asked.

"Tap water will be fine, thanks."

She looked at me in horror or disbelief. "Tap water? Oh no. I have bottled water somewhere my dear. We're not peasants are we!"

Lily Amsel was not at all what I had expected. I knew time would have ravaged her but this woman looked at death's door, despite all her efforts to conceal it. Wearing a diaphanous gown that might have been passable on a woman 50 years younger, her pale arms bare but for a fine layer of dark hair, and a neck as pitiable as a chicken's on the chopping block. Her thin hair was bleached blonde and the perilous outline of dark red did nothing to disguise time's nicks and scars on her upper lip.

She dragged her old bones out of the room, the dogs following her as though attached by an invisible leash. Finding myself alone I decided to have a little sneaky peek around. I desperately wanted to know what was in that birdcage. Reaching up I tilted the cage so I could see inside and I was treated to a blast of that same potent smell.

Lying inert on the floor of the cage, amongst torn scraps of discoloured and bone-dry newspaper was the skeleton of some creature. It was perhaps the size of a squirrel or a large bird, but this didn't belong to any animal I could recognise. The little body was only half the length of the skull and was made up of numerous tiny bones. Rotten teeth protruded at every angle and its eye sockets were too small. It had four legs of equal length but the front two feet (hands? Paws?) were much smaller than its hind pair. There was not a scrap of meat on it. The bones were dirty brown and crumbling,

as though it had been picked clean many months ago by a carrion-consumer or a hungry clot of maggots.

I was so engrossed in this freakish work of art that when a small cat jumped silently onto the chaise longue from the window, and down to the floor in a clean, mathematical motion, I almost had a coronary. I had never trusted cats with their quiet, unassuming smiles and holier-than-thou attitudes. I glared at its silky, fluid back as it strolled off towards a darker part of the room. I turned to Lily with a smile as she came back in the room, her frailty evident in her slow shuffle. She managed to set down the two glasses on a table before bursting into a fit of coughing that racked her ailing body.

I helped her to the chaise longue and she sat with some difficulty, her dress hitching up to reveal varicose veins snaking around her calves.

“Well, she croaked, looking at me reproachfully as if I had been wasting her time. “Are we going to get on with it?”

She'd been gregarious, in her time. She'd been downright exhibitionist, in the fullness of her youth. So much had been written about her in the numerous biographies, radio shows, newspaper articles. There had been photos of her out and about with the pet panther she kept on a leash. There were rumours of her turning up at restaurants and letting her fur fall to the floor to reveal bare breasts and firm buttocks. Intelligent, witty, raucous, she was every boy's fantasy and every girl's idol. In a way I wasn't surprised that she had turned into this Baby Jane character, holding onto her youth in an arthritic iron-grip, desperately trying to keep hold of the things that had made her a star.

And today she was the perfect interviewee, dishing out the gossip of the time, telling, perhaps, tall tales and exaggerated truths. She was charming, witty and ready to spill the beans, even if they were out of date. She spoke spiritedly about her four husbands and the string of lovers that included Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart and Lon Chaney, Jr. She gossiped about which directors had bedded which actresses, who was locked firmly in the closet, who slept with call girls, and which producers had been tried on fraud charges. She was most animated and almost revived by this plunge into the past. So animated, in fact, it seemed almost as if she were

rediscovering a past that had long-been suppressed. No, it was more than that. It was like she'd never left it.

If it weren't for the occasional slip of her dentures which she sucked back into place with a well-practiced motion, I would almost believe she really had been transported back there, for a moment. A brief whirl of false lashes and fur coat and we could be back in the Hotel Rio where most of her antics had played out.

But when she started coughing again I was brought back to the dusty here and now. The attack lasted longer this time. I offered her my glass of water but she shook her head, eyes squeezing shut and tears rolling down her rouged cheeks.

"Damn! Damn!" She gasped. Her breath seemed to scratch in her throat and her fingers raked the air as though she could claw in some oxygen. But finally the coughing subsided and she began to regain her composure. I decided to continue the questioning and ignore the undercurrent of urine now apparent beneath that stronger stench.

"So, what have you been up to since you retired from the silver screen?" It was the first question on my list. I was expecting talk of donkey sanctuaries, or high living in Parisian hotels with men half her age.

"I watch my films," she said.

"Oh really? Do you have a favourite? I'm quite a fan of noir myself."

"After Dark, Justine, The Odyssey, Last Train to Frankfurt ..."

She was reeling off all the films she'd starred in.

Beside my chair, the golden retriever was focusing its sticky attentions on a creature half its size but, for all accounts, a total bitch, as she kept thrusting her rump towards the bigger dog and then skipping away coyly.

"...Teacher's Pet, Marilyn and Freddie, Paper Chase..." Either Lily was oblivious to the dirty deed or was just accustomed to it. I tried to catch the full list of vehicles that had careered the woman so securely into the public's favour, but the noise of the dogs, now in full swing, was getting too loud.

She paused for a sip of what I guessed was gin.

"And I'm writing a book." She smiled.

"Tell me about that," I said, desperate now to steer the interview to its end.

“It’s an autobiography called *Life in the Fast Lane*. I’ve almost finished it. Would you like to read a little?”

That cinched it. I had that book sitting on my shelf at home. It had bent corners and toast crumbs between its pages and a black and white image on the back cover of the young, glamorous author. I’d had that book for about 10 years. I’d bought it second hand. It was first published in 1952.

I came to the conclusion I’d been toying with from the moment Lily Amsel opened the door. She was ill. She was, undoubtedly, suffering from dementia.

I stood up. The dogs continued to rut regardless.

“I think that’s a wrap.” I said. “It’s been wonderful and I have everything I need from you.”

“Wait!” She said, with some urgency in her voice. She tried to get up but seemed unable to lift herself from the chaise longue. I helped her to stand on legs that were barely strong enough to take her small weight.

“Let me show you something,” she said. “Come.”

She led me to the far side of the room and again that damn cat jumped from the shadows, startling me. We stopped in front of a gnarly old dresser and she pointed to the candle on the top. Like all the others this had bled itself dry and was stuck firmly in its own effluence. It was covered in a layer of dust.

“There.” She said, triumphantly. “I keep it just as it is. I’ll never throw it away.”

My face obviously gave away my lack of understanding. She pointed to it and brought her face closer to mine. In a whisper she said, “Isn’t it an exact replica of the final scene from *The Devil’s Daughter*? Right down to the smoking gun in my hand.” She cackled, which brought on another bout of coughing. I grabbed her arm, ready to lead her to a chair before her legs gave way, but she shook her head and pulled her arm out of my grasp.

She mumbled something and I had to lean in closer to hear. That smell, that stench emanating from her open mouth, her clothes, her very pores. It was making me nauseous.

“Help me,” she said. I started. I moved away.

She looked almost *compos mentis* now. She looked right into my eyes. “I’m dying,” she said, and tears began to roll down her cheeks, giving them

the appearance of soggy, crumpled tissues.

I wasn't a quick thinker. I wasn't one of those selfless people. I was just out for my own survival and this was definitely beyond my comfort zone. That stare, piercing and almost accusatory, was frightening me. I didn't want to be a witness to this.

"It's killing me," she cried.

Suddenly she brought her hands up to her throat. She began scratching, scratching at the skin there, digging her claws in and drawing blood. She exhaled a low moan and my heart pounded against my chest, the backs of my eyes, the roof of my mouth. My fear heightened my senses and I heard a small movement, felt a low growl, probably from the cat, or one of the dogs. I've heard animals can sense imminent death.

"I'll get someone," was all I could think to say.

But before I made a move her skin began to throb, like the tiny fluctuations of a baby kicking in utero. The papery skin on her breastbone was flexing and retracting and her small bosom heaved. Her flesh was rolling around something beneath that roiled and struggled. As I watched with eyes as big as ping-pong balls, the skin at her breastbone ripped apart with a wet tearing sound leaving a hole about five inches long. I fell back, landing on my bottom on the rug. A small black hand or paw flexed its digits and poked through the orifice, its fur matted and wet. And then another hand joined it and the two pushed their way out, tearing at the pliable skin, opening the wound further, stretching it wider as the dress, too, began to rip.

Lily sputtered and coughed. She raised her head and shuddered. Brown eyes rolled back and red drool ran down her chin. Her white dress was covered in blood as the split in the fabric and the epidermis grew wider, exposing sagging breasts, a crumpled belly.

Her body fell with a flop to the floor, legs and arms tangled in the bloody dress and torn skin. Her wig fell from her head revealing a scalp covered in sores and small tufts of white hair.

I was frozen to the spot. I'd never known terror before. My own body was as rigid as hers was flaccid; melded wood and metal whilst hers was pliable as elastic. The thing inside her looked comfortable in its soft and oozing nest. It seemed uninterested in me and its surroundings. It rubbed its eyes with small black fists and then stretched first one leg then the other out of Lily Amsel. It stood before me in all its two-foot glory.

And then came the others. From beneath the chaise longue, the dresser, the chair. The cat suddenly whipped across the room, screaming, as it was chased by a lesser version of the beast in front of me. The dogs were howling. The creatures came closer, many, so many of them, while the parasite before me licked the blood from its fur.

It looked down at the used and discarded bloody bandage on the floor, and then up at me and for the first time seemed to actually see me. Still frozen with fear I watched and waited as it started to move -

Towards its new host.

Escaping the Mirror by Farah Ghuznavi

Diya was having a good day. Her tea party had been a great success, and her carefully prepared food had been consumed to the last crumb. Even the guests had behaved well, despite her earlier concerns about whether they would all get along.

Mixing guests was always a risk. She was well aware that her Barbie doll was jealous of her teddy bear, for example. But teddies were special, as everyone knew; besides, he had been with her the longest, a gift from her parents when she was a baby. So Diya had no hesitation in justifying her preference. Anyway, on this occasion her Barbie had behaved gracefully, mingling with her other guests, and even at one point chatting to her teddy.

Humming happily to herself, Diya packed all the tea items, throwing away her leftover ingredients of leaves, flowers and twigs. Suddenly she felt a slight prickling along the back of her neck. She stopped singing, and looked around. Minhas was standing at the entrance to the L-shaped veranda, watching her.

Diya's mood changed immediately. Why was he standing there? She hated Minhas! He was always sneaking around, and watching her while she played. Diya didn't know why that bothered her so much, but it did.

Minhas was their driver. He was young and smart, and a great favourite with her parents. He was treated differently from all the other staff, and was often heard to say boastfully that he was like a member of the family. Diya didn't think so, and she wondered why he said it. But nobody cared what she thought; after all, she was only seven years old.

It hadn't always been this way. When Minhas first came to work for them, the previous year, Diya had liked him. He was fun. He told her stories, and made her laugh - he didn't treat her like a little child. Sometimes, he even brought her presents: a bar of Mimi chocolate or an ice lolly after school. Best of all were the contraband goodies Minhas purchased for her from the itinerant vendors clustered outside the school gates, enticing students to their bamboo baskets full of savoury snacks - jhalmuri that made Diya's mouth burn even as she savoured the deliciously sharp flavours of puffed rice mingling with chillies, onion, mustard oil and

fried lentil-noodle fragments; or peeled amra, the tart green fruit sculpted into a flower shape with "petals" to be snapped off and dipped into a chilli and salt mixture.

Her parents did not approve of her eating these things. In fact, all the adults had terrible stories about how children got sick from eating street-food, but Diya rarely had an upset stomach. Besides, the occasional bout of diarrhoea was a small price to pay for these delights.

So the forbidden culinary pleasures remained a secret between Diya and Minhas; one that he made much of. "Your parents would be very angry if they knew that I was giving you this", Minhas often said to her.

"But who will tell them?" Diya would reply, determined not to be deprived of the treats she craved.

"Well, if you're ever mean to me, perhaps I will tell them!" Came Minhas' teasing response.

"But why would I ever be mean to you?" A puzzled Diya would ask, unable to comprehend how such a situation could ever arise.

Diya didn't know when her feelings started to change. Perhaps it was after Minhas insisted that she sit in the front seat with him when they were travelling alone. Diya's parents had two cars, but her favourite was the big blue American car, the Dodge Dart, which Minhas drove.

The Dodge had black leather seats, with a retractable divider that served as an armrest in the back. When Diya was very young, she had liked sitting on top of the divider, because it made her feel taller and gave her a better view of the road. Even when she grew a little older, the Dodge remained her favourite car - although she was soon too big to sit on the divider anymore.

The drivers who worked for Diya's family had designated cars and duties. Minhas was Diya's father's driver; he was much friendlier than the one who usually accompanied her mother to work - grouchy old Jamshid. In any case, it was Diya's father who usually dropped her off at school before heading off to work, so she invariably saw more of Minhas.

In Diya's first few years at school, Abba used to come home for lunch, and would pick her up on the way. But when her father started staying at office throughout the day, Minhas came alone to pick up Diya. It was sometime after that change in routine that Minhas suggested that Diya sit in the front seat with him.

Initially, she demurred. It wasn't that she minded sitting in front, but she was used to the backseat, and it seemed more natural to her. Besides, she liked using the divider in the back as an armrest. The front seat didn't have one; it was a long, sofa-style seat.

But eventually, it became difficult to refuse. Minhas would say "It's because I'm just a driver, isn't it? You think you're too good to sit in front with me..."

Diya hated it. She felt funny when he said that.

Her parents had taken pains to make her understand that while some people were born into rich families and others were poor, that was simply a question of luck; all of them were human beings, and it was wrong (and rude) to treat anyone with disrespect. She understood that somehow Minhas was trying to say that she was that kind of person, a bad person. Even though she knew it wasn't true, Diya felt compelled to move to the front, just to prove him wrong.

In the beginning, it was fine. But then Minhas started insisting that she sit closer to him. He said that if she sat on his lap, he could teach her how to drive. Diya told him that she wasn't old enough to drive yet, but Minhas insisted that driving was a lot of fun. It certainly was fun when he made the car zigzag wildly, as he sometimes did, sending her rolling from one end of the seat to the other. So Diya tried to watch him and learn, even though it looked rather complicated to her.

Minhas had a very good memory. He had learnt large sections of Koranic verse and could recite it at will. Diya found this quite fascinating. She understood no Arabic (neither did Minhas, who had only learned to read the script), but the sounds were intriguing. So sometimes she would ask Minhas to recite for her. He was always very happy when she asked him to do this, saying that she was a good girl, a pure girl.

But Diya had another reason for asking him to do the recitation. She knew that when Minhas began speaking in Arabic, his concentration was focused on the verses he chanted, alongside driving. At such times, he did not talk to her about other things, stranger things. He had been mentioning those things more often of late. And Diya had begun to find this increasingly disturbing.

Like the time that Minhas dropped her off at her grandmother's house, one Saturday.

Diya's grandmother, Nanima, had been a widow for many years, and lived with her eldest son. Their house was set amidst spacious grounds, and they had a spaniel called Mishti. Diya, who loved dogs, enjoyed playing with her. There was a lot to do there, and she was never bored, but sometimes she did manage to get into trouble...

One time, Nanima's living-room was being re-painted. As soon as Diya arrived at the house, she was warned sternly by her grandmother not to go there. But at some point during the day, the combination of idleness and the irresistible lure of the forbidden drew her towards the room.

As she slipped inside the door, she saw two workmen. One was mixing the paint, and Diya watched with fascination as he expertly blended the contents of two containers together in a bucket. The other man was standing on top of a step ladder, dipping his paintbrush into the pot balanced precariously near his feet, and applying even brush-strokes to part of the wall. As Diya watched the men working, she leaned, unnoticed, against a freshly painted section of the wall.

By the time she went to join Nanima for lunch, she had an uneven stripe of paint running along the left side of her body. She even had some of the sticky white stuff tangled into her thick black hair.

Nanima was not amused. Keeping up a running commentary on Diya's disobedient nature, and the faulty gene pool on her father's side that Nanima held responsible whenever she was displeased with her granddaughter, the old lady was unnecessarily vigorous in applying the inevitable turpentine to take off the paint. But despite her watery eyes by the end of the session, Diya remained unrepentant.

Nanima got her revenge a few days later. When they played their regular game of Ludo - which Diya, not competitive by nature, as usual lost - Nanima took a particularly vicious pleasure in "killing" her tokens, and returning them to the starting point, time after time. At the end, a tearful Diya surveyed the devastation Nanima had wrought on her blue tokens - three of which were still languishing at the starting point, while all four of Nanima's red tokens had romped to victory. Cackling with laughter, her grandmother said, "You'll have to learn to be tougher. You are just too soft - you'll never win this way!"

Diya thought long and hard about what her grandmother had said. She wondered if it was true that there was something wrong with her. Maybe

that was why Minhas had been acting so strangely with her lately. After all, he seemed to be just the same with everyone else.

That morning, when Minhas dropped her at Nanima's house, Diya was preparing to get out of the car when he suddenly said, "Aren't you going to give me a kiss before you go?"

Diya looked at him in surprise. "Why should I kiss you?" She asked.

"Don't you love me?" He countered.

Diya didn't know what to say. Minhas was her friend, but she didn't want to kiss him! Why was he asking her to? Minhas waited for her answer, but when she didn't reply, he continued "If you don't love me, I'd be sad." When Diya remained silent, he repeated insistently "If you love me, you can prove it by giving me a kiss. Come on..."

Suddenly, Diya just wanted to get out of the car. But as she reached for the handle, Minhas's long arm shot out and pushed down the door lock. He did not remove his arm after securing the door; it stayed where it was, pinning Diya against the back of the leather sofa-seat. "Let me go!" Cried a frightened Diya.

"Only after you kiss me!" Said Minhas, with a teasing smile.

"Let me go!" This time Diya screamed as loud as she could, even as she pushed against him with all her strength. Abruptly, Minhas removed his arm, leaving her to fall forward against the dashboard, as the pressure holding her back disappeared without warning. He had a thunderous scowl on his face.

Diya scrambled out of the car, and rushed into the house without looking back. She was so scared she couldn't breathe. Badly shaken, she locked herself into the bathroom next to the library. Several minutes passed before she had calmed down sufficiently to enter Nanima's room.

Diya told no-one about what had happened that day. She didn't know how to explain it, because she couldn't understand herself why she had been so frightened. After all, Minhas had just asked her for a kiss. He hadn't even really hurt her. And it wasn't as if she was going to kiss him.

But the incident changed something in their relationship. Diya could not forget how trapped she had felt, pinned against the car seat. Minhas was so much stronger than her. She knew she couldn't stop him if he really wanted to do something. But he would never hurt her - would he?

After that, Diya began to avoid being alone in the car with Minhas. Although he pretended that nothing had changed, she knew that he sensed the difference, despite her attempts at normality. In any case, it was hard for her to really avoid him; he was still the driver who delivered her to and from school.

And now, Diya never sat in front with him. Even though Minhas made fun of her for sitting in the back by herself, she remained firm. She was well aware that he didn't like it, though.

Something else was different. Minhas had started using the rear-view mirror to watch her, as she sat in the back. Diya would move from one end of the backseat to the other, but to no avail. Wherever she sat, he would simply adjust the mirror to ensure that she couldn't escape his eyes. And each time she allowed herself to look into the mirror she would see him watching her.

He made no attempt to hide the fact that he was staring. Even when she refused to look up, she could feel the intensity of his gaze boring, laser-like, into her stubbornly lowered head.

She grew to hate the car that she had once loved so much, and to dread each ride she had to take in it. Years later, Diya would think to herself ironically that the car was well-named; but no amount of dodging or darting in the backseat could make her feel any less afraid of that mesmerising stare in the rear-view mirror.

Gradually, her behaviour began to change. The child who had been famous within her family for chatting to total strangers - to the extent that her parents were constantly worried she would be an easy target for kidnappers - became increasingly reluctant to meet new people. She was more reserved with others around her as well, only ever relaxing in the company of her parents or close friends. The changes were so incremental that nobody noticed; the warning signs were missed by the adults around her.

Diya had a large bed in her room, but she always slept on the left side. Now she began sleeping in the centre of the bed, as far as possible from the three open sides.

Each night, before she went to bed, she carefully, almost religiously, carried out a detailed ritual. Four of her stuffed toys - the same ones every night - were placed around the bed to keep guard in all directions. Her teddy sat on the right, her stuffed dog to the left, respectively facing the door

and windows in her room. At her feet sat the monkey her grandmother had given her. And propped up against the headboard of the bed was the weakest of the four, the baby kangaroo.

Any deviation from this routine caused her severe anxiety. The occasional washing of the toys often meant an agonising wait to see if they would dry before bedtime.

Diya also altered her patterns of play. She never went to the garden by herself anymore, because Minhas could usually be found hanging around the car, which was parked in the garage nearby. She also stopped going to the roof alone, although it had been one of her favourite haunts in the past - a wide-open space where her vivid imagination could run riot, dreaming of space travel and pirate ships, costume balls and desert islands.

While she was less likely to see him there, there was only one staircase leading up to the roof. So if he did follow her, Diya knew she would have no way of escaping. Consequently, she only went to these places if there was another member of staff or one of her friends accompanying her. But once again, no one noticed these changes in her behaviour.

Minhas was beginning to get angry with Diya now, and it showed in the increasingly aggressive comments he made during those endless, excruciating car rides. Sometimes he said things like, "If I took you somewhere and kept you locked up there, no-one would ever know. I could just say that I left you at school, and you weren't there when I came to pick you up. They would never find you!"

Her threats to tell her parents about his menacing comments carried little weight. "Do you think that they'll believe you? Of course they won't! When I tell them what a bad girl you are they'll believe me, not you. And they'll be very angry with you!"

"If you aren't kind to me, I will tell them that you've used bad language with me. Who'll be in trouble then?" He would say threateningly. And despite Diya's increasingly desperate denials, she couldn't help believing him. It was true that her parents liked him, and it was also true that they became very angry if she ever used abusive language, especially with household staff.

Despite worrying obsessively over her parents' reaction, Diya did try to tell the adults around her what was happening. But she didn't have the

words to explain her fears about the driver, and Minhas had already begun spreading his poison. Her parents were worried that she didn't like him because he was a servant. They had done their best to bring her up to be polite to all adults, and they couldn't understand why she was behaving like this.

Her father tried to reason with her. "Sweetheart, you used to like him. Now he says that you are very rude to him. Why don't you like him anymore?" He asked. The more Diya tried to explain, the less she was able to make herself understood.

In the end, she settled on the one phrase that she kept repeating, to no avail. "He looks at me! I don't like the way that he looks at me!" She would cry.

"But we all look at people, baby. Why shouldn't he look at you?" Asked her puzzled parents. Diya had no answer for them; at least, none that they could understand.

Slowly, Diya began to believe what Minhas had been saying to her. She was a bad girl, and this was all her fault. Why else would this be happening? She sensed, somehow, that nothing similar had ever happened to any of her friends. So she couldn't bring herself to raise the subject with them either.

No-one believed her, Diya thought despairingly, just as Minhas had warned that they wouldn't. Perhaps if her parents really found out the truth about the kind of girl that she was, they wouldn't love her anymore. After all, they already thought she was a naughty girl to be so mean to Minhas.

One night, lying in bed, with her mother sitting next to her and stroking her hair, Diya asked, "Ma, you know how the Prophet - peace be upon him - was the messenger of God?"

"Yes, of course," replied her mother.

"Well then, do you think that I am the messenger of the devil?" Asked Diya hesitantly.

"Of course not! Why would you say such a thing?" Asked her horrified mother.

"I just wondered..." said Diya, longing to make her understand.

Her mother soon forgot about the conversation - perhaps she was even a little disturbed by it, and wanted to forget. But Diya did not.

The years passed, and Diya gave up trying to talk to anyone about the problem. As far as possible, she tried not to think about it. But that was difficult to do with Minhas' malevolent gaze constantly following her around. She became an expert at ensuring that she was never alone. But even the most carefully laid plans sometimes spiral into chaos.

In the large, open drawing room of Diya's house, a curving staircase led the way to the corridor on the second floor, which opened onto three adjacent bedrooms - inhabited by Diya, her parents and any guest who was visiting. Under the staircase, there was a small sheltered nook, hidden from view by a number of potted plants. It was one of Diya's favourite play-spots, and a relatively safe one, because the drawing room was very near the kitchen, where one of the household staff could invariably be found.

One night, Diya decided to go down to the kitchen to get a drink. She made her way down the staircase and was passing through the darkened drawing room, when suddenly somebody grabbed her from behind. She realised that it was Minhas. He had been standing underneath the staircase, where he couldn't be seen. Perhaps he had heard her voice as she told her parents she was going down, and slipped into the space to lie in wait.

Held tightly against him, Diya could feel the heat emanating from his body. The smell of the cheap cigarettes he smoked was unmistakable, and as she struggled to get loose, he pressed her against himself even harder. In panic, instinctively, Diya bit him hard on the shoulder. More in surprise than pain, he let go, and she ran to the kitchen.

The housekeeper was surprised to see her; even more so by the child's demand that she accompany her back to the stairs. "I'm scared of the dark," said Diya - who was not just scared at that moment, but terrified. And perhaps something of her fear communicated itself to the woman, because she walked Diya back to the staircase without further comment.

Minhas continued to look for opportunities to continue his peculiar form of psychological warfare. As if the way that he stalked her, and the regular episodes in the car were not frightening enough, he kept up his threats to discredit her in front of her parents. And yet, although Diya believed what he said, she couldn't bring herself to consent to the alternative, and give him what he wanted.

On another occasion, things almost went too far. Diya was walking past the garage entrance, trying not to look in that direction, when the Dodge

Dart came to life with a sudden roar of its powerful engine. Before she knew what was happening, she found herself being pinned against the wall by the front bumper of the car. She looked through the windscreen to see Minhas grinning maliciously at her.

By the time one of the guards came running in response to her cry, Minhas had reversed the car back into the garage. Diya knew that he had done it to frighten her. And he'd succeeded. Her legs were shaking so badly she could barely stand, but there was no physical evidence of what had taken place, and the guard witnessed nothing.

In subsequent years, Diya's state of preparedness for possible sneak attacks by the driver became almost second nature. As she grew and matured into a teenager, she also learned better how to hide her fear, cultivating an attitude of cold indifference.

Whether Minhas realised that she would not give in, or whether he simply grew bored with the game, his focus shifted elsewhere. The one element of his behaviour that remained unchanged though, was his use of that rear-view mirror. And so, the thing that continued to bother Diya through most of her teenage years - in spite of her newly-minted composure - was the familiar, sickening sensation of being watched whenever she was in the car.

It was more than a decade after it all started, that Diya was able to put a name to what had happened. By that time, Minhas had long disappeared from their lives; fired, of all things, for stealing petrol.

It was a magazine article that brought the painful memories surging back to the surface nearly a decade after it had all begun...

Even then, it might have stopped there - what was the point, after all, in reliving that misery? - if it had not been for a chance remark by her father as he threw down the same magazine Diya had been reading earlier that day. "These Westerners are crazy," he said, 'see, things like that never happen in this country!'"

Diya felt as though her head would explode from the sudden, overwhelming rage that swept through her. "What do you mean, Abba? How can you say that it never happens in your country? It happened in your own house, and you didn't even see it!"

It took her a moment to recognise her own voice as the one speaking. Her father had gone pale, as he looked at her in horror, "What do you mean,

Diya? What are you saying?"

She couldn't stop herself from continuing, though; it was as though a dam had finally broken - the spider-web of cracks on its facade that she had not even been aware of, simultaneously giving way. "You know what I mean, Abba! Think about it! I'm talking about Minhas..."

Her father seemed to age before her eyes as he spoke "Minhas? You mean, Minhas....." He couldn't finish his sentence; his voice broke. "Why didn't you tell us?" He said, in anguish.

Diya was calm now. This reckoning had been a long time in coming. "I did," she said sadly, "I told you in the only way I knew how to."

"But all you said was that..." Diya waited for him to finish completing his sentence, watched the realisation dawn on him, even as he said, "...that he looked at you..."

"But I didn't understand what you meant, Diya! You should have told me..." her father continued, brokenly.

"I was seven years old, Abba. I didn't understand what was happening - I just knew that I didn't like the way he looked at me! What else could I say? And even then, no one listened - you all thought that I was some spoilt horrible child being mean to the driver!"

And finally, with a tremendous sense of relief, the tears came - the tears that had been held back for so long; blurring her vision as Diya looked at her father, holding his head in his hands, sitting there in the unbearable realisation of his failure.

Mother's Pride by Gary Fry

"I don't believe it."

"What don't you believe?"

"This," replied Tanya, and held up the book she'd just located in a dusty corner of the attic.

She and Oliver had come to clear out her mother's house before putting it on the market. They'd already dredged up many prompts to her memories of growing up here, deep in the Yorkshire Dales, but none had grown so powerful that Tanya had suffered another episode of the cloying grief she'd been nursing since her mother's death six months earlier. She'd put off this essential task until she'd felt more able to cope with it, and now it was almost done, she was proud of how stable she'd managed to remain.

But now she'd found this book . . . And twenty-five years of life appeared to have been swallowed whole, as if by some great, time-hungry beast.

She shuffled across the bare boards of the attic and finally came to a halt just in front of her husband, who'd been filling black bin liners with litter nearer the attic's hatch. When Tanya wobbled a little, almost stumbling towards the opening in the floor, Oliver put out a hand as if to steady her, but instead he snatched the book from her grasp.

"Hey," she protested, as if he'd violated a secret part of herself. This was a foolish thought, she knew, but she experienced it all the same.

However, Oliver was reading the title. "The Monster Book for Girls," he said, his voice faux Hollywood-Horror, deep and sinister and a little bit slower than normal. Then he chuckled. "You know, most young lasses are into The Secret Garden or The Chronicles of Narnia. But not you, huh? Even as a kid, I see the social worker in you was looking for trouble."

A draught rushed up from the rest of the bungalow, but only because the place hadn't been occupied for a long time. Tanya snatched the book back from her husband, and said, "If I recall correctly, this was all innocent stuff." Its hardback cover showed a hideous creature with hair and teeth and claws lurking behind a Wendy House in some perfect child's bedroom . . .

Just then, a memory tugged at Tanya, and it wasn't one she cared for. "But . . . But . . ."

"Hey, what's wrong, Tan'?" Oliver asked, having clearly noticed Tanya's edgy expression. He rested a hand on one of her shoulders to show support. "You look like you've seen a -"

"Oh, don't say that," she snapped back, but then started to open the book. "Not a ghost, no. Something else. Something else."

They'd put their daughter to bed the following evening before they got another chance to talk about the book Tanya had found in her late mother's attic. Freda was seven years old and already more aware of what went on around her than Tanya thought was good for her. After playing with a few dolls taken from the Dales bungalow, the girl had gone to sleep cuddling them, leaving her parents to retreat to their own room and discuss what had been on Tanya's mind all day.

Before Oliver could say anything, Tanya opened the book at its contents page and reread a list of stories whose words felt like little stabs to the brain.

"The Crab that Snapped . . . A Reign of Rhinos . . . Vultures Ahoy . . ."

Despite his wife's sullen expression, Oliver couldn't help but laugh at these titles. He'd spent most of the week dealing with savage debt crises in a number of underprivileged families, and despite his wife's recent bereavement, he was in no mood for the tinsel terrors of her cushy, rural, two-happy-parents-and-a-blissful-child upbringing. He said, "It sounds like a funny book. Was it supposed to be?"

"It was supposed to be, yes," Tanya replied, but as she paged carefully through the tome as if she had a specific page in mind, she added, "But to a young girl with no siblings, and who lived out in the middle of nowhere, it didn't always seem to be."

By now she'd reached a page whose heading read The King of the Urban Jungle. Underneath these boldly printed words was a sketch of a lion standing upright on its hind legs, with a long mane flowing like some madman's beard and its front paws pushed forwards, as if it was out on the prowl.

Tanya shuddered in response to the image.

Oliver reached across for her, pushing one arm around her shoulders. He was still feeling slightly grouchy from many hard days at the office lately, not to mention all the hauling and lugging he'd done at his late in-law's place yesterday, but he always knew when his wife needed support . . . And this was certainly such an occasion.

"Are you okay, love? Hey, look, you're getting goosebumps." He pulled her closer, held her tight. "Want to tell me about it?"

Clutched in his embrace, Tanya nodded, wiped her face with the back of one hand – God, was she crying? Yes, she was crying – and finally sat up again to say, "They were all just silly tales about monsters . . . well, not even monsters. Just everyday animals dressed up as humans and committing naughty acts. But this one . . ." She stabbed a finger at the page she was still displaying – that creepy lion with the mane of golden hair, which had ascended to walk in bipedal fashion. " . . . This one always terrified me for some reason. It scared me to death."

Oliver looked again at the sketch. The creature was certainly unpleasant in appearance, all its claws sharp and unyielding. But these days it was no worse than stuff the average child saw daily on TV. He tried to imagine their daughter reading the story, and found it hard to believe that it would scare her in any significant way. However, the attitudes of his and his wife's childhood – the more innocent, impressionable 'seventies – had altered so much lately it was scary to think about.

"Hey, it's okay. There's nothing to be scared of now," he said, stroking Tanya's back. He knew from his caring profession that she was now going through a complicated process of grief, of coming to terms with the past. Although he'd always felt slightly resentful of Tanya's idyllic childhood – especially compared to his own: a council estate in nearby Bradford involving a father with a thirst and a belt, and a habit of combining the two – he continued to comfort her as she added more.

"I'm just being silly, I know –"

"No, no . . ."

"– but for years after reading this book, I had terrible nightmares about a . . . A giant cat with a long mane of golden hair and big shiny teeth coming after me and . . . well, prowling for me . . . And when he . . . when he caught me . . ."

"Yes?"

She pulled away, looked at her husband. “Don’t laugh at me, Oliver.”

“I won’t laugh at you, Tanya.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Okay, then.” She hesitated again, though only for a moment. “When he caught me, he’d lick me to death.”

Despite feeling slightly unsettled by the way his wife had just referred to this giant cat as “He” rather than the less anthropomorphic “It”, Oliver was now finding it difficult to keep his face straight. And it was principally because he’d been told not to laugh that he suddenly felt like doing nothing else. Indeed, with a burst of energy like released rage, the laughter suddenly escaped him. It was soon loud enough to wake their daughter, sleeping safe and secure in the next room.

Tanya only gazed at him, with a predator’s silent fixity.

The following evening, after Tanya and Oliver had put in another day’s work at adult social services, there was a nature documentary on TV about the Serengeti, including footage of all the lions that lived there, how they ate, bred and groomed one another.

Freda, who would be going to bed in about ten minutes, had been learning at school about the way these creatures lived in what she termed – much to her father’s amusement, if not her mother’s – their “natural habitat.”

Something about this phrase, redolent as it was of old clothing worn casually, had put Tanya foolishly in mind of the sinister friend of her younger self: the prowling king of the urban jungle. She’d recalled fragments of that story, of how the two-legged beast had triumphed over its limitations by learning the ways of the human world, while also retaining many of the abilities which had made it so imperious in its – surely Freda’s intended phrase – natural habitat.

Tanya had eventually thrust aside all this nonsense in her mind and said, “Okay, come on, darling. Time to go upstairs and visit the Land of Nod.”

Her final phrase – another refugee from her dark, distant past – seemed wasted on her daughter, who continued to watch the documentary with a slavish devotion to acquiring new information. When Tanya looked

again at the screen, she noticed all the lions tenderly washing one another, long thick tongues sliding across their companions' faces.

What with all the other god-awful creatures in *The Monster Book for Girls* – snapping crabs, kicking mules, hungry vultures – why had she selected this animal to haunt her dreams?

But she was now growing distracted again. She looked up, and with a little more firmness said, “Freda, please do as you’re told. There’s school in the morning.”

“Do you want me to take her up?” Asked Oliver, flipping down a neat diagonal of *The Guardian*, which until now he’d been hiding behind.

“Yes, Daddy, I want you to tell me a stooory,” said the girl, suddenly turning away from the TV. And this then resolved the matter. Tanya was tired and still feeling a little raw after sorting out her mother’s belongings a few days earlier. She thought she could do with a little time to herself, to indulge in some quiet contemplation.

Once Oliver and Freda had vanished upstairs, Tanya tried to throw her meandering mind off a powerful scent of meat – or rather, off various nebulous, unsettling aspects of her childhood that now threatened to render her stomach delicate and her muscles tight. She watched the large, graceful creatures on-screen, prowling back and forth. Lions were magnificent animals, she decided, and then realised that, having a birthday in late July, she had a close connection with them. Astrologically she was a Leo and quite a typical example of this star sign: loyal, generous and confident. She wondered whether this fact was subconsciously related to her morbid reaction to the animal in the book upstairs . . .

Yes, Daddy, I want you to tell me a stooory, Tanya heard her daughter say in her mind.

Oh God, he wouldn’t. Surely Oliver wouldn’t take *The Monster Book for Girls* and read Freda the tale about the king of the urban jungle.

Nevertheless, Tanya was on the stairs and headed for her daughter’s bedroom before this thought had passed through to the more rational parts of her now confused and frightened mind.

She found her husband bent over the girl’s bed on his knees, thrilling her with a story from about halfway into the book that he and Tanya had found in Freda’s grandma’s attic.

“Oliver, no,” Tanya cried, and hurried forwards to snatch the book from his hands. Freda’s looked bewildered, but Tanya’s eyes were fixed on the tale Oliver had been reading the girl.

It was indeed *The King of the Urban Jungle*.

Stepping back as she studied her husband and daughter, Tanya couldn’t help feeling as if the two of them were in this together, as if they were conspiring against her, much in the way she occasionally had with her own father against her mother . . .

But of course that was nonsense. Okay, so Freda had obeyed Oliver downstairs after ignoring Tanya’s multiple requests for her to go to bed. And yes, Oliver had started reading to the girl the tale that had caused Tanya so much disquiet the night before. However, none of this was a sufficient reason to forge such deep, complex theories about their family history, was it? She and her parents had enjoyed a happy, stable time together in the Yorkshire Dales. And now her life here in Leeds was equally contented and well-balanced.

She was back in the master bedroom, thrusting the offending book into her underwear drawer before her husband stepped in to see her. He’d almost certainly just reassured their daughter that all was well, that Mummy was simply going through a sensitive time at the moment, and that Freda should get some sleep in advance of school tomorrow.

Oliver shut the door and said, “Well, what was all that about?”

“You knew how I felt about that story, Oliver.” This was all uttered without even offering him a glance. “So why did you go choose it? Freda has lots of other books. What was wrong with any of them?”

“She told me that she’d read all the rest. Then I remembered this one. And I thought . . .”

“But that’s the thing, Oliver – did you even think at all?”

“I did, actually. I thought that if I read the tale to Freda, and you saw how easily she was able to cope with it, you’d maybe feel less . . . Oh, I don’t know, less uncomfortable about the whole stupid issue.”

Now she did glance at him; it was a wary glance, but it nonetheless re-established their usual bond of trust. For a while earlier, Tanya had felt as if Oliver had betrayed her, but now she could see that perhaps he’d had her best interests at heart.

“Okay,” she said at last. Then she paused a moment, trying hard to eliminate a mental image of her recently deceased mum, of the older woman’s aged face looking troubled and upset . . . Finally Tanya added, “Okay, maybe I overreacted. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry,” replied Oliver, and suddenly moved towards her with large, floppy paws, kissing her face with his mouth wide open. Then he finished in a voice that knew no better, “And don’t worry, everything’s going to fine.”

That night she dreamed of her father, come back from the dead with a lethal glint in his rotting eyes. So much time in a coffin had done little to benefit his appearance, though most of this was concealed by the only thing that grew after death: long strands of golden-brown hair enveloped his face like a lion’s mane. As he scrabbled towards her across a city floor painted in greens like jungle camouflage, he tried repeatedly to clamber up onto two legs, and yet failed again, again and again. He was holding a book – The Monster Book for Girls – and when he finally reached her (Tanya was unable to move, felt pinned down, as if under tucked-in bed sheets), he roared through fangs dripping with spittle, “Let me read you a goodnight story, Tanny. One of those your mum doesn’t like. Eh? Eh? Eh?”

She woke up, screaming.

The following day Freda didn’t come home from school.

On weekdays, whenever Tanya and Oliver were working at the city’s council offices, a child-minder would pick the girl up from the playground, take her back to her house, entertain and feed her, and bring her back safely in the evening.

But on this occasion that familiar routine didn’t occur.

Tanya called the woman at about seven p.m. She was a reliable employee, with impeccable references and thirty years’ experience in the field of childcare. She’d never let Tanya and Oliver down in the past, and had looked after Freda since she was two years old. Something was obviously wrong.

As the phone rang and rang, Oliver paced back and forth. He looked frantic, his eyes wide and accusatory. When Tanya put down the phone, grabbed her car keys, and then ran out to her vehicle to head for their

employee's house, he followed and climbed into the car beside her. Neither said a word before reaching the woman's house.

The child-minder wasn't home. Her property was in darkness. None of the curtains had been tugged on. She couldn't be hiding inside, playing a little trick with the girl. This was a ludicrous suggestion anyway. Tanya knocked again at the woman's door; hammered at it. She tried the handle. The door was locked. A moment later, she turned to her husband and said, "What do we do? What's happened?"

"I'll c-call the police," he replied, and his hands were already reaching for his mobile phone, pecking in digits, hoisting the unit to his ear. Then he was speaking unthinkable words.

Tanya could only look at the stars in the cold October sky, thinking about her baby, wondering where she might be.

The police found the child-minder beaten and tied to a chair in the cellar of her property. After questioning in hospital, it was discovered that her home had been violated just after lunch that day, a few hours before her supervision session with Freda was due to begin. The woman claimed to not have caught sight of her attacker – apparently, he'd crept up on her from behind – though she'd offered an impression of him all the same.

"He smelled . . . Powerful," she'd told police through a purple-lipped mouth. "Like the scent you smell everywhere in a . . . In a zoo."

Detailed forensic analysis of the house was, however, unable to identify any more significant clues.

During the two days they spent without their princess, Tanya and Oliver slipped into a cold kind of shock. Their marriage groaned along like old machinery, running on tracks as solid as those many people had laid down about twenty years ago, before the fickle modern days of surface attractions and quickie divorces had subsumed stable lives.

On the second night, Tanya said to her husband in a numb and drugged voice, "I had a . . . A special relationship with my dad, just like the one you have with Freda."

Oliver could only look at her. He was clearly tired of listening to the nebulous thoughts his wife had been expressing for a long time. It surely wasn't the right time to discuss such matters – not now, not with this problem

to deal with. The phone might ring at any moment, after all. They should reserve such mental scab-picking and any associated analysis for later, once they had their girl back. Nothing else would matter then, nothing at all.

Nevertheless, Tanya went on. "I'm not saying such relationships between a father and a daughter come are at the expense of those between a mother and her child. But . . . well, there's certainly something different about them, isn't there? I mean, you surely must agree. You share that with . . . with Freda. And even if you can't put such feelings into words, you must sense them."

"Tanya, for God's sake . . ."

By now, she'd plucked the book from her underwear drawer, had opened it at the page on which that majestic lion stood proudly on two legs, mane flowing like gold fire, teeth glints of silver.

"Daddy used to read this story to me," Tanya continued, oblivious to her husband's escalating discomfort. He'd had a rougher upbringing than hers, but at least the problems of his youth had been visible, risen up on the surface like errant nails that needed knocking down, requiring only a hammer to do so. By contrast, her own family psychology had been subtle and unseen, requiring precision instruments to tackle: tweezers to tug out strands, needles to prick and prise . . . Tanya, snapping shut *The Monster Book for Girls*, then added, "Mummy didn't like this book at all. She thought its material was unhealthy for young girls. And you know, I think maybe . . . I think maybe she was right."

And when Oliver glanced at his wife before the light went out and they both foolishly attempted sleep that night, he felt that if any accusations between them were now directed at him.

The following day there was incredible news. The police had located the man who'd abducted Freda, and the girl was alive and well. If she was also a little too shaken to have spoken yet, she nonetheless seemed capable of handling the intervention of social workers.

Tanya obviously hadn't been involved in this case and had taken an indefinite period of Compassionate Leave from work. Oliver had soldiered on at the council, making executive decisions on benefit applications. However, as soon as the police had arrived at the house with the news,

Tanya had called his office. Then they'd both travelled independently to the police station to put an end to their unspeakable nightmare.

In an interview room with the two policemen leading on the case, they were told to sit down on chairs in front of a table. As a technician prepared a television on a stand in one corner, the chief inspector – a grizzled, middle-aged man called Patterson who looked as if he could use a smoke yet begrudgingly observed health and safety regulations – said, “The guy who beat up your child-minder and then abducted your daughter has yet to speak to us, and frankly we’re having difficulty identifying him. We have no records of his fingerprints, and the few bits of paraphernalia we found about his person haven’t helped. At the moment, therefore, he remains a mystery.”

The inspector paused, swallowed awkwardly (even with all his experience, this bit never gets any easier, thought the on-looking Tanya with queasy discomfort), and finally went on.

“We have to tell you that we’ve been required by law to conduct a medical examination of your daughter – I mean, of course, an intimate medical examination. However . . .” – just then, Patterson’s voice grew less uneasy – “. . . we’re relieved to report that there’s no evidence that Freda has been . . . well, I understand you’re both involved in social services. Perhaps I needn’t elaborate on this part in detail.”

“You needn’t,” Oliver replied, and during the lengthy breath that followed he exhaled enough relief for Tanya, too. However, he then asked with renewed anxiety, “But what about the . . . The bastard that did it? What do you plan to do with him now?”

“Would you both like to see the man who took her?” Asked the inspector, nodding first at his colleague and then at the technician who was still in the room. “We’re quite willing to reveal what led to us apprehending the sod.”

As the other policeman stepped out of the room, the technician, fingertips poised at some recording/playback equipment underneath the TV, was ready to respond to an affirmative response from either parent. And then one was forthcoming – from Tanya, a quick steely-eyed nod.

“Show us,” she said, her voice firm and resolute. “Let me see him.”

As video footage crackled into life on the television screen, the inspector said, “We acquired these images from one of several CCTV cameras positioned outside your daughter’s school. After asking teachers

and some other parents about a guy standing among a crowd of people waiting near the playground, we were able to track this man back to his lair. And believe me, I do mean lair. He was living in a . . . well, a den, I guess you'd call it. In the middle of a nearby wood. And that was where he took Freda. It was where, we believe, he kept her for the two whole days and nights she was missing."

By now the screen had been wiped clean of static and showed the school playground in which Tanya's daughter and all her friends skipped and hopped daily. Just outside the grounds, behind a fence high enough to keep out all but the most determined of intruders, was a gathering of people, each clearly awaiting either their own child or one they were paid to look after.

And in the middle of this group stood a man.

Well, Tanya thought it was a man. In truth, it might be an optical illusion designed to play havoc with all her memories. The guy's face was half-hidden by a streaming mass of long, golden hair. His body was slightly hunched, yet regal in appearance, so that he actually resembled a creature that had acquired just enough characteristics to pass itself off as a human being. His mouth was crinkled and knowing, revealing twin rows of longish teeth. His hands, which he kept lifting and pushing through all that dense facial hair, boasted nails that looked thick and sharp enough to rip great chunks out of his enemies . . . Or perhaps prey would be a better term. Or even quarry.

The terrible truth was that this man looked a lot like a lion, and one now in full command of its adoptive new territory.

"I know that's him," said Tanya, and pointed at the screen, hysteria rising in her throat, sobs welling inside her like a forest flood.

"Oh . . . No, darling," Oliver tried to intervene, having clearly also perceived the likeness the figure on TV possessed to the one he'd witnessed the other night, in that cursed book. "Now, come on, Tan'. Please don't start all that again. You know it's not healthy. It's just irritation- . . ."

But he got no further, because then the second policeman re-entered the room. He came directly across to his colleague to whisper in his ear. Tanya, now rendered hypersensitive by rage and fear, threw off her husband's feeble paws and was able to hear every word.

"The guy's just spoken for the first time," the man said, keeping his voice cautiously low. "He's given us a name."

Patterson raised his eyebrows, prompting more information.
Tanya looked on, now gasping for the knowledge.
And then the man added, “He says he’s called Leo Mains.”

Tanya burned The Monster Book for Girls in her back garden. This was now several months on from that dreadful event. She’d thought – or rather, hoped – that this cathartic act might trigger a response from Freda . . . Something other than the troubling silence with which she’d greeted the world after spending those few days in the woods with that terrible creature.

The police still hadn’t managed to learn anything more about the culprit. He remained locked in a cell, great hands rested in his lap and with that mane of golden-brown swayed about his face with enigmatic grace.

Whatever this guy had done to Freda after taking her away that day had obviously not involved anything lewd, but it had nonetheless disturbed the girl enough to prefer being outside, in nature’s arms, and never uttering as much as a single word.

And when Oliver returned home from work later, their daughter would do what she always now did: lick his face with affection, until he smiled back and licked her back.

A Story of Love by Marc Lyth

Let me tell you a story.

Are you sitting comfortably?

Then I'll begin.

That's hardly the most original way to start a story, but it's as good as any. I still remember when I was a kid and my Dad would play those old shows to me. I used to think it was so great, that my Dad was sharing his childhood with me. I loved the old guy but I never realised at the time how much he loved me and how much I must have disappointed him. I didn't pay too much attention at school and he didn't like that, so if I get my words the wrong way round I'm sorry. "You're a bright kid," Dad would tell me. 'don't waste those brains God gave you." But I didn't listen. That's why I had to use those opening lines; they bring back the second happiest time in my entire life.

The happiest time of my life happened not so long ago.

I'd just left college where I'd finished an incredibly boring course in how to use computers and I was starting in an office job - also incredibly boring. I only wanted to stay there for a couple of months, get something down on my CV, move on to something interesting.

I had no way of knowing that this dead end job, typing standard letters and photocopying tedious documents, was going to change my life so drastically. Would I have still worked there if I'd known that in advance?

It's where I met Maria, so the answer would be yes every time.

I met her on my second day in the office. I was delivering the mail because the boss had run out of photocopying for me to do. She worked on the second floor, in sales and marketing. I know how corny it is but I'd never believed in love at first sight till I saw her. She was absolutely everything I liked to see in a

woman. She wasn't too thin or too fat; she had beautiful shoulder length brown hair, not in any real style, just natural. That was the thing that struck me about her first. She seemed so... So REAL. She wasn't wearing much make-up but she was still easily the most gorgeous girl in the room.

Plus she had a glorious pair of tits. I know how shallow that makes me sound, but I was a red-blooded guy and she was just so perfect.

The instant I saw her I knew that her heart would always have a home in mine. Just that first glimpse gave me that turned-on tingling sensation but I knew that this wasn't just lust. This was love. It had to be because the tingling wasn't only in my bollocks. It was all over my body from the tips of my toes to the small scar on the top of my head (a relic from a childhood accident involving a toy car - but I digress).

I handed over her mail, my mind racing for something clever to say. The initial contact is so important in these things. I nearly died of embarrassment when all that came out of my mouth was "Argle!" Talk about making a good first impression.

She looked up at me with those hazel eyes that could see right into the deepest depths of your being. (Well I thought they could anyway.) "Sorry?" She said, "What was that?"

I regained some composure; just enough to stammer the immortal line "Are you Maria Samuels?". I asked her this despite the ID card she was wearing prominently on her magnificent left breast with her picture and her name on it. I prayed for the ground to swallow me whole.

"I was last time I checked." She smiled then she straightened her blouse, hiding her cleavage. She must have thought that I was ogling her breasts not looking at her ID card. This was just getting worse and worse. I was almost glad when the fool sitting opposite her, a short fat balding guy with breath that could kill a camel from ten paces, suddenly asked if I was going to deliver any more mail or was I going to just stare at Maria for the rest of the day. It gave me a reason to move on and leave this whole sorry mess behind me so I could try tomorrow or in the canteen later to try to rectify the situation.

"Don't be so mean to poor Eric," Maria replied to the fool, "He's new. Thanks Eric."

My heart leaped for joy. She already knew my name. The gods were smiling on me; she must have spotted me and asked about me to find out who I was. I was in with a chance. It never occurred to me that I had the name Eric Cooper in nice large print on the ID card pinned to my own shirt pocket.

"Go on Eric, you'd better get on with the mail round. Mr Tompkinson can be a real monster when he wants to be. Don't pay any attention to Craig there. He just likes to pick on the office juniors." She smiled at me again and the sun rose in my soul.

'See you around.' I said, tearing my eyes from her at last. I set off round the rest of the office whistling, glad I had the trolley in front of me to hide my obvious excitement.

That was our first meeting. I saw her on and off like that for a couple of weeks, delivering her mail and finally managing to exchange some pleasantries. In those weeks I found out more about her, what times she took her breaks, where she went for lunch, how many sugars she used in her coffee. Where I could, I took the same breaks as she did and I started going to the same sandwich shop. I eventually managed to gather the courage to sit next to her at lunch and start talking.

We both had the same tuna mayo with mixed pepper salad on brown Vienna and we were both reading copies of the same book - Salem's Lot by Stephen King. She was halfway through but I had barely started. I think if I could have gotten away with wearing the same clothes as her to get her attention I might have done it.

The book did the trick and we had our first proper conversation. I managed to find out that she was single (Yippee!), lived alone, had one sister and one brother (both older) and that she was reading the Stephen King for a reading group but she didn't like horror. I asked her where the reading group was and could I come along; I was still new in the area and didn't really know anyone yet. She said yes and our first date was sorted.

I say date, in reality it was our first meeting outside of work. It was still progress. We went to the book club where a group of dreary old men and women droned on about something to do with the novel. I don't know what they said, the only thing I could see or hear was Maria. Just sitting next to her in the bookshop was heaven. It came to my turn and I said something inane about it and why I enjoyed it. The group listened politely to me and ignored everything I'd said. I didn't care. I was sitting next to Maria. That was enough.

At the end of the meeting I asked if she wanted to go for a drink. She refused but suggested we go out on the Friday. I agreed, probably too eagerly, and offered her a lift home instead. She did accept the lift and

climbed into the passenger seat. I only just remembered to ask her directions to her house - it wouldn't have been good to let her know that I already knew where she lived and that I'd watched her from a distance a few times over the past few weeks. Working in personnel, it's easy for even a low level filing grunt to get intimate details of most people in the company.

Friday couldn't have come soon enough for me. I made a huge effort; we were going out straight after work so I dressed in my best going-out clothes in the morning. At five o'clock I almost ran to meet her. That was when I found out that her whole department was going out together and it wasn't just a quiet night for the two of us. If there is a word that tells how disappointed I was, I don't know what it is.

Late on in the evening, Craig, the fool who sat opposite Maria in the office, started making lewd suggestions which she did NOT like. It meant I got the chance to play the hero and rescue her when he tried to grope her. As a result of this, I managed to secure a proper date. This time, just the two of us, and the three "P's - Pizza, Pictures, Pints. Not the most glamorous of dates but a great way to get to know her.

The next day I paid Craig a quiet visit at home. I needed to explain to him how much I loved Maria and the numerous reasons he should stay away from her. I think the discussion went as well as you'd expect.

I met Maria for our first proper date the following week. After initial small talk about the office, why Craig hadn't been in all week, it wasn't like him not to call in sick, that sort of thing, the date went well. As did the second and third dates. On the fourth date she let me stay over at hers and we...You can guess what we did. I won't go into detail because you don't kiss and tell on the woman you love. I was in heaven. This was officially the happiest time of my life. On our fifth date I told her how much I loved her and wanted to be with her forever. That date finished early with me going home by myself while she had to think about what I'd said.

We didn't have a sixth date. She told me I was too pushy, too intense. Couldn't she see that what we had between us was the best thing she would ever have? She said she wanted to break up with me. I couldn't understand what had gone wrong. I still don't know. We were soulmates. I knew it instinctively. She knew it too but was too scared to admit it to herself. All I needed to do was to make her admit her true feelings. I bought her presents.

I sent flowers. I waited for her outside the office, outside her house, at the pub where I knew she liked to drink.

She ignored me. When she wasn't ignoring me she was shouting at me to leave her alone. When she stopped shouting at me she pleaded with me to stop. I told her that I couldn't. We were in love. Why couldn't she see that? She must have had some repressed emotional trauma which wouldn't let her be happy with anyone. There was no other reason for her to behave like that. She called the police to warn me to stay away from her. I lost my job. It gave me more time spare to watch her.

One day her brother showed up at my front door with a group of thugs. They dragged me out and beat me senseless. They ordered me not to go near her again.

They shouldn't have done that.

When I was released from hospital, I waited outside the brother's house till he returned from work. After tying the handle of his back door to a tree so he couldn't open it, I put petrol soaked cloths through the letterbox at the front of the house and followed that with a couple of lit matches. Then I sat back on the other side of the road and watched. I never did find out what company he got his double glazing from. It was really good stuff. He hammered at it with something for ages (I couldn't see what, he was backlit at the time) before the smoke got to him and he collapsed.

My next visit was to see Maria. I needed to tell her I forgave her. I knew that her feelings were just too strong and she was having difficulty accepting the way she truly needed me. I opened her front door with the key I'd secretly had cut soon after our third date. I'd spent a few happy days sitting in her house while she was at work, being very careful to clean up before I left. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't leave presents inside the house, if she changed the locks I'd lose my visitation rights.

She was in the living room when I walked in, eating her tea and watching one of those talk shows where sad pathetic losers whine on about how no one loves them. She screamed. I thought it was a bit unfair. I was still bruised but I didn't look that bad.

"Hey," I said. "I just want to say I forgive you."

"Get out of my house you freak!" She yelled. "My brother will be here soon. Get out!"

At that moment, the phone rang.

"Leave it," I said. "We need to talk."

The answerphone picked up the call. It was her sister, hysterically proclaiming that their brother was in hospital with severe burns and his house had been deliberately burnt down.

Maria stared at me. "You smell of petrol. You did that!" She launched herself at me, trying to dig her nails into my face. With as gentle a force as I could, I threw her onto the settee and held her down till she stopped struggling.

"I don't understand what you want Maria," I explained. "All I want to do is love you. I'll do whatever you want me to."

"Get out of my life then!" She said. I was amazed she could joke at a time like this.

I laughed. "Anything except that obviously. You sent your brother after me. Why? If you want me to bleed, I'll bleed for you look." I picked up a steak knife from her plate on the coffee table and hacked at my wrist. 'See, if you want me to hurt, I'll do that. I love you so much.'

The knife must nicked the artery in my wrist because suddenly a gout of blood spurted ten feet across the room. It was fascinating. I watched as my blood, my life fluid, was pumped away in rhythmic arcs of colour. Maria was screaming again now. Was there no pleasing this girl? She wanted me to hurt and bleed so here I was doing it in front of her and all she could do was...

The detail goes a bit blurry here. I was still weak from the hospital so I didn't need to lose too much blood before I passed out. I don't even remember her calling the ambulance.

So that's my story. I need to go in a second anyway. She's just got out of a car and is going into her house now.

I'm going in there to beg forgiveness. I must have made one hell of a mess of her carpet.

I hope she'll have me back.

Wish me luck.

Dancing the Skies by Ian Sales

Somewhere over the Yorkshire Dales, Veronica Walker-Kelly looked up from the handling notes strapped to her thigh, and there it was above her: a black silhouette, crucified against the underbelly of a cloud. She pulled back on the control column, opened the throttle to climbing boost, and her Spitfire Mark Vb swept upwards at a steep angle. The fighter had no guns - they would be fitted at the RAF maintenance unit - but the monsters did not know that. The pretence of making an attack usually scared them off.

The creatures had something of a seal about them and something of a Messerschmitt Bf 109. They were dark green with white bellies, had great jaws lined with sharp teeth and a red eye on each side of a long snout. They flew like raptors, climbing with languid beats of their wings then stooping like thrown javelins. Ronnie did not encounter one on every ferry flight; but it was a rare month when she didn't.

The roar of the Rolls-Royce V12 Merlin pounded the air. Ronnie felt the thrill of combat. The creature slid away. She moved the control column to one side, her foot hard on the rudder-pedal, and followed. Now she had attacked, she must stay on its tail. Give the monster a chance, and it would turn on her. Those great teeth would savage her wings, would rip them apart; and she would fall.

But not this time. Not ever.

The creature folded its wings and arrowed towards the ground. Ronnie rolled her Spitfire and pushed it into a dive. Not too steep or her carburettor would be starved by the negative G, and her Merlin would cough and falter and die. The monster continued to plummet. Its wings unfurled and bit the air. Its dive flattened. It shot across the moor, a handful of feet above the scribbles of heather written purple on the pale green. Ronnie hauled back on her control column. The Spitfire screamed. She felt the wings flex, the fuselage warp, she felt her aeroplane suffer. Once back in level flight, she leaned forward against her straps, her gaze fixed on the monster.

Abruptly, it slid to the right, and pitched up into a steep climb. Ronnie could not follow. She drew back the control column, her hand to the throttle,

but the creature was behind her. She banked, looked up, and saw it disappear into the pillowy underside of a cloud.

She had won this bout, she had scared the monster away. Throttling back, she returned to her original height and heading. She expected the rest of flight to White Waltham to be entirely routine.

The nurse gave her shoulder a gentle shake though Ronnie had only been dozing. She opened her eyes and peered blearily up at the young woman.

“Time for your pills, Mrs Walker-Kelly,” said the nurse, proffering a small paper cup.

Ronnie reached up, but faltered as her gaze lighted on her hand. This gnarled and spotted claw - was it hers? And the wrist to which it was attached: skin like doped linen, tendons and ligaments taut as wires beneath the surface. Her dream of flying seemed to vanish into limitless haze, the endless blue burning of the sky turning opalescent and transforming into a ceiling of magnolia dotted with fittings which glowed with nacreous light. The close confines of the Spitfire’s cockpit became an armchair in sea-green velour.

“What?” She said, confused.

“Your pills,” prompted the nurse. She rattled the cup.

“I was flying,” Ronnie said querulously. “A Spitfire.”

The nurse gave her a sad smile.

“I flew in the war, you know.”

“Which war was that, dear?”

“The Second World War. I was a pilot.”

But the nurse had put down the paper cup and turned away.

They thought she was senile, but it wasn’t dementia that was killing Ronnie. What did that young woman know about the War? Ronnie had indeed flown Spitfires. Not against the Jerries, of course. She’d been a ferry pilot in the Air Transport Auxiliary, piloting aircraft from the factories to the RAF airfields. It had been dangerous work, and Ronnie had lost a number of good friends.

She had done her bit and been glamorous with it. She’d even had her picture on the covers of magazines. She remembered the photographers and the poses they’d beg her to adopt, the flash of the cameras, the earnestness

they brought to something she considered silly. She also remembered the succession of dashing officers who escorted her through London's blacked-out nights, journeys in taxis with slitted headlamps, dancing till dawn in the '400' Club to You Stepped Out Of A Dream, egging each other on to tax the ingenuity of the kitchen staff under rationing, and getting home as the sun stole over the rooftops. Finally there would be the train, puffing through the countryside, taking her back to White Waltham.

And, once there, learning that a fellow ATA pilot had flipped his Hurricane on landing, and drowned in three inches of water because he'd been strapped in, the cockpit hood open. All those colleagues who had died. Not to mention the dashing young officers who'd accompanied her - how many of those had never come home?

All gone.

She shifted in her chair, trying to find a more comfortable position. She could see little of her surroundings, her sight made dim and blurry by her slowly failing liver. But her vision of the past remained sharp and clear. She saw those days lucidly, as though lit by summer sunshine. She had been such a bright young thing, not this cowering collection of skin and bones, slowly collapsing into itself. The real world was becoming increasingly unreal to her, increasingly distant. Each day, Ronnie must look harder to see it, must think more to understand what she saw.

But she was not ready to give up yet.

It was harder to avoid the monsters in bombers. The two and four-engined aircraft didn't have the manoeuvrability of fighters, and their size was no deterrent. The creatures would swoop in close and try to clamp their toothy jaws on the wings. Ronnie needed to keep her wits about her. Clouds were dangerous, the ATA pilots had that drummed into them. She could not hide there, for who knew what else they hid. One girl she knew had found herself in clouds and bailed out seconds before her Airspeed Oxford flew into a hill.

Flying low helped, but was hard work. She must keep a weather eye on the sky above her, and yet also watch the ground below for landmarks. Occasionally, she had bellowed over farmers on their tractors and scattered the seagulls wheeling in the wakes of their ploughs. The ATA training hadn't

included blind-flying. Despite the hundreds of hours spent in many different aircraft, Ronnie did not have the confidence to fly entirely on instruments.

This trip had been uneventful. She'd piloted the Vickers Wellington down from Blackpool, and it had been steady flying through cloudless skies all the way. Now, she brought the bomber down from the windswept heights, following the landing litany as laid out in her handling notes; autopilot off, elevator trimming tabs to neutral, superchargers to medium, speed to 120 knots, the great wheels in each engine nacelle lowered into the airstream. At 105 knots, she set the flaps fully down, and the Wellington floated thunderously over the airfield's boundary hedge, its shadow prostrate on the grass and growing larger and larger, until the bomber hit the ground with all three wheels.

After unlocking the tail-wheel and taxiing from the runway, Ronnie turned the aircraft into the wind and carefully reduced the throttle until the pounding of the engines slowed to one thousand rpm. Two minutes later, she pulled out the slow-running cut-out controls, and the Bristol Pegasus engines sputtered and died. Ronnie clambered from the pilot's chair and made her way back along the fuselage to the hatch.

When she dropped from the aircraft to the ground, she found an airman waiting for her beside a staff car. She crossed to the vehicle, opened the rear door and climbed in. The airman did not move.

"Come on, man," she said. "I need to get these papers to the Watch Office."

He looked back at her disinterestedly. "I'm waiting for the pilot."

"I am the pilot," she told him.

"You can't be. You're a woman."

He remained unconvinced until he'd searched the Wellington from nose to tail, and even then, as he drove Ronnie across the dispersals to the control tower, he continued to shake his head in mystification. It was not the first time. She'd heard of the same happening to some of the other girls, too.

In the Watch Office, she handed over her delivery chit, but the flight lieutenant seemed more interested in flirting with her. He sat on the corner of his desk, one foot propped on a chair, and casually lit a cigarette with a match.

"I've seen you before, haven't I?" He said. He had a small moustache and big hands.

“First time I’ve flown here,” Ronnie replied.

“I know your face, though,” he insisted. He cocked his head and peered at her. “I’m bloody well sure of it.”

Ronnie sighed. She’d had this a lot since the issue of Picture Post with her photograph on the cover.

“I really must get going,” Ronnie said. “I need to catch a train to Hamble.”

The officer stood. “I’ll have someone run you to the station,” he told her. “And thanks for the Wimpy.”

He held out his hand then stared down at it as if wondering what he was doing. Before he could withdraw it, Ronnie reached forward, grabbed it, and shook it. There were still those who had no idea how to respond to women pilots, despite Amy Johnson being in the news for over a decade.

Confront them with a uniformed woman in trousers, and they were even more confused.

No one visited Ronnie. Her husband had been killed a handful of years after the War, flying for the MEAF. His de Havilland Vampire FB.5 had crashed in the desert somewhere in Iraq. She’d never learnt the name of the place, afraid somehow that knowing it would make his death seem less real. They’d told her his cockpit canopy had shattered. The aircraft had been sitting in the burning sun all morning, and the cold at 35,000 feet had cracked it. Vampires had not been fitted with ejector seats.

Ronnie’s grandchildren never came to the hospice. Perhaps they had forgotten her. Her son, not a flyer and so always something of a disappointment, had died twenty years ago. His family had drifted away soon after, though not through any fault of Ronnie’s. It had simply happened. She felt guilt over the loss: she should have done more, she regretted letting them go so easily. In the years since, she’d not led a solitary life, but in these end days she felt her loneliness keenly. She sat in her armchair, television no more than two feet from her, the colourful world it displayed a polychromatic blur to her failing eyesight. Her hands would not do as they were told. The volume was usually too loud in her headphones and she could not turn it down. The nurses did nothing when she asked, simply said, “Yes, dear,” and carried on about their business.

Sometimes, her vision seemed to clear and a picture would swim into focus out of the television screen. A landscape seen from the air... And she would remember peering down from the cockpit of a Hawker Hurricane, or a Bristol Blenheim, searching for landmarks among a green patchwork of fields and woods, trying to marry the ground below with the symbols on her map.

Why now did those wartime memories seem so rich and colourful? Why not during the years after? That grim post-war period of rationing and make-do, the optimistic Sixties, the discontented Seventies... They had all faded, lost in the blurred background that was now Ronnie's world, a place of indistinct conversations, and the darting flashes of colour which were the nurses.

Some days, Ronnie struggled to remember who she was, and where. She always knew who she had been. Her sense of self seemed to have travelled back in time, to have returned to the 1940s and she was, in her mind, that bright young thing, the ATA Girl, of all those decades ago.

Ronnie stopped by the Common Room on her way out of the Mess. Half a dozen girls were scattered about the room; Diana in the corner darning a stocking, Maureen curled in an armchair and deep in some edifying work of literature, the others gathered, heads-down, about the wireless and listening to Vera Lynn on the Home Service. "See you later, girls," Ronnie called. She waved gaily as she danced away, and laughed over the jealous looks she imagined were being directed her way.

Still laughing, she ran out of the building to where Roger waited in his HRG sports car. He revved the engine and waved.

She tripped across to the automobile, leaned over its low-slung body and pecked Roger on the cheek. He stiff-armed the passenger door open for her. She laughed as she clambered in - it was so very much like the cockpit door of a Hurricane or Spitfire - and settled in the leather seat. She loved sports cars. And she adored the men who drove them.

"You look absolutely smashing, darling," Roger told her. He slammed the car into gear, and they roared away.

Normally, Ronnie caught the train to London and stayed with her mother in Knightsbridge, but Roger had been visiting relatives near Reading and offered her lift into town. Where he'd got the petrol from, Ronnie didn't

ask. Nor did she care. She pulled a Jacqmar headscarf out of her handbag, and tied it over her hair. The wind whipped over the car's tiny windscreen, and she grinned into it. This was not as good as flying, but it came a close second.

Roger dropped her off at her mother's an hour later. They'd made good time, speeding through a countryside slowly drowned in dusk, through towns and villages flooded by night. The slitted headlamps of the HRG shed little light, but Roger did not slow his headlong pace. He threw the sport car around corners with the skill and dash of an ace fighter-pilot. On the straights, he trod heavily on the throttle, and the twelve horsepower engine beneath the bonnet howled like the younger sibling of a Merlin.

Ronnie turned from the door to the house, and waved at Roger. He was off to his club to change. Later, he'd return to pick up Ronnie, and take her out on the town.

* * * *

When the nurse appeared in front of her, Ronnie looked up blankly. "Time for bed, Mrs Walker-Kelly," the nurse said.

Ronnie raised a hand in feeble protest. She was ill, but that was no cause for sleeping in the middle of the afternoon. But the nurse took her hand, gently, and then leaned forward to hook an arm behind her shoulders.

"Come on, dear," she said. "It's well past your bed-time."

Ronnie found herself being hoisted up out of her armchair and onto her feet. She grabbed at the nurse's shoulder. "No," she said but, to her own dismay, her voice was no more than an unintelligible mumble. "No," she repeated, more forcibly. "It's not time."

"Of course it is, Mrs Walker-Kelly," said the nurse, her voice somewhere near Ronnie's shoulder. "It's eight o'clock at night. You need your beauty sleep, you know."

"No!" That was involuntary. Where had the day gone? Ronnie remembered waking up, being settled in her armchair, and eating breakfast... No more than thirty minutes ago. She had been thinking about something, although what it was she no longer recalled. But it had been only moments ago, she was certain of it. Belatedly, she saw that the ward was now ill-lit,

the windows, normally mere rectangles of light to her dimming vision, were now black. Eight o'clock? At night?

Ronnie allowed herself to be hoisted onto her bed. She lay back as the nurse fussed efficiently around her, removing her slippers, folding the sheets over her.

"I'll leave the light on for you," the nurse told her. She pressed a switch on a flex into Ronnie's hand. "You can turn it off when you're sleepy."

Sleepy? How could Ronnie be sleepy? She had spent all day sitting in an armchair, and the day had passed in the blink of an eye. But, as if the mere mention were enough to bring it about, she felt tiredness begin to steal across her. She squinted, and brought the light switch up towards her face. As it swam into focus, she pressed a thumb on the rocker. The lights to either side of her bed went out.

The ward was never entirely dark. She would have preferred darkness, she felt safer in darkness. During the black-out, she had always felt safe. When the Jerries came over, searchlights stabbed at the sky, slicing back and forth, cutting up the night, so that the Heinkels and Messerschmitts could not escape. Barrage balloons would swim in and out of view, like whales basking in bands of moonlight on a stygian sea. And then the ack-ack guns would decorate the heavens with their fireworks. When the sirens blared, everyone would hurry to the nearest shelter or tube station. The '400' Club was a cellar, so they were safe there. But the music would stop, and they'd all sit in silence, gazing up at the ceiling.

Ronnie was never scared. She flew the skies of England, so this could not frighten her. And she loved the way the boys with whom she danced marvelled at her fearlessness.

In dark alleys in the blacked-out city, Ronnie would see shadows slide from sleek curves, and knew monsters hunted her. London was a city cloaked in night, its life carefully hidden. The creatures thrived in the darkness, and grew to populate every shadow. Ronnie knew she was their target, not the handsome flyboy on whose arm she might be hanging. She'd squeeze her beau's biceps tighter - not from fear, but because she felt a frisson of excitement at the sight of the monsters' red eyes.

Sometimes she'd even try to tempt the creatures out into the open. She would stop to adjust a stocking - her American friends ensured she was

never short of nylons - pretending she were easy prey. But her escorts always leapt to the attack first, as if they were the target of her teasing; and the creatures never left the safety of the shadows.

Once inside the '400' Club, or Café de Paris, however, it was an entirely different matter. The war was forgotten, despite the preponderance of uniforms. Ronnie never wore hers when she was out dancing, of course. They often talked "shop" as they swilled champagne, swapping tips on flying Hurrys and Spits and Wimpys and Tiffys and Mossies; and Ronnie would revel in the astonishment of those new to the group as they heard her hold her own on the subject.

Sometimes, the mordant humour got too much, and Ronnie would turn away. She would never see anything humorous in death; she could not cope by laughing at it. These evenings, spent in darkened clubs, orchestra playing softly, the shuffle of couples' footsteps on the dance-floor – these evenings were a respite.

When the night was over, Ronnie would kiss her beau goodnight, and hope there was no air-raid. In the morning, she'd dress in her uniform, cross London to Paddington Station, catch a GWR main line to Reading, and then a branch line to White Waltham. She did not know where she might be sent to collect an aircraft, or where it might need delivering. She knew only that she would plot a route on her map, avoid clouds and barrage balloons, and hope the weather would remain clear and that no monsters would attack her.

Sun-split clouds painted shafts of golden light across the sky. Ronnie lay her head against the bubbled canopy's side, felt its warmth on her cheek, and peered forward and down. The Spitfire's Merlin droned reassuringly, its prop a blur. She consulted her map, and searched for landmarks. She rolled the fighter, hoping to see further across the land. None of the aircraft she ferried had radios fitted so if she was lost she could not call for help. Neither was there any navigational gear, it was all dead-reckoning.

Looking up, she spotted a dark shape above and perhaps a mile or two ahead of her. She thought at first it might be another aeroplane. But no, its silhouette appeared to wax and wane against the blue: an illusion caused by the beating of its wings. Had the monster seen her? She thought about going low, diving to an altitude of two hundred feet or so, and eluding it in that fashion.

As if prompted by the thought, she saw it transform into a cross: it was turning. Ronnie opened the throttle, pulled back on the control column, and took her Spitfire higher. Let the monster climb to her, let her have the advantage.

She had a feeling this would be an important dogfight.

Now the creature was close enough for detail; the baleful gleam in its red eyes, the saliva roping its sharp teeth, the sleek muscles that rippled beneath its skin with every beat of its wings. Ronnie rolled and dived. The monster shied away from her attack, slipping sideways through the air. She glanced up at the rear-view mirror, saw that it was now on her tail. She banked to the left into a sweeping turn. The monster cut inside her. Its great maw opened and its teeth grew closer and closer to Ronnie's wing. She banked the other way, pulling the wing away moments before the monster's jaws snapped shut.

Into a steep climb, throttle hard against the climbing boost gate, the Merlin screaming in protest. This creature was tenacious, Ronnie could not shake it; this could be the one that did for her, but she would not allow it. She was no mere ferry pilot, but an ace. She was an ATA Girl no longer, but a warrior of the footless halls of the sky. The Spitfire, such a lovely aeroplane to fly, seemed an extension of her will, its wings her arms, the din of the Merlin her own roaring voice...

This was combat: supercharger to auto, throttle wide open. Ronnie fought for her life. She would not be defeated, she would not be forgotten.

Ronnie rolled and banked, dived and climbed. The monster stuck to her tail. She looped, caught it by surprise; but it drifted from her sights as she closed on it. This one was staying close, this one was not going to be scared off quite so easily.

Ronnie opened her eyes, and peered blearily across the ward at the empty bed opposite. Had it been empty yesterday? She could not remember. She seemed to recall a succession of visitors over the past few weeks. They had gathered about the bed, holding conversations she could not follow, voices shrill and meaningless.

How long ago had that been?

She felt more torpid than usual. The television, its dancing screen, was an annoyance. Everything she heard seemed filtered through layers of

wool. She did not feel as though she fully occupied her body, as if parts of her were elsewhere, perhaps engaged on some important task. She tried to concentrate, tried to focus on the television. She needed to think, thinking helped, thinking kept the flatness at bay. She refused to lose the power of thought. While the world slowly drifted from her, became more distant, almost at times spectral, she must hang on to her sense of self, she must know that colour and music and life and love and thrill and threat still existed. She must know she could think, that it took only application and will.

She must not let it slip away, she was not ready to surrender just yet. She had been such a bright young thing in her day. She had been on the cover of magazines. She would not have her life forgotten. She would not herself forget what she had accomplished.

Ronnie sat in her sea-green velour armchair and wished it were the cramped cockpit of a Spitfire. She squinted at the fourteen-inch television before her, and imagined it were the view through a Spitfire's windscreen. She put the stiff-fingered hooks that were her hands to the arms of her chair and longed to feel the curved grip of a control column.

She had battles to fight yet. She needed to be strong to defeat the monsters. They were coming closer, they were coming for her now.

Somewhere over the Pennines, Veronica Walker-Kelly looked up from her instruments, saw the monster almost upon her, and rued her Spitfire's lack of machineguns...

Frustrated Fran by Kat Fullerton

This is the story of Frustrated Fran
She killed her husband with a frying pan.
Their marriage had been heading steadily south,
And he should've watched his stupid mouth.

The day began like any other,
They had a fight and he called his mother.
Fran took a breath, cursing her life,
Regretting ever becoming his wife.

John was once charming, now mostly a jerk.
And most likely boning that cutie at work.
He thought that he better live while he can,
But John had a date with a frying pan.

Fran made his breakfast, feigning nice,
While her heart was fire and her blood was ice
Her mind was afar, plotting
a plan,
Until she killed her husband with a frying pan.

Frustrated Fran had some cash put away,
Saving it for that wonderful day,
She'd buy a ticket and get on a plane,
Never to be seen or heard from again.

John sat at the table and sneered cruel and sleazy,
'the toast is burnt and the eggs aren't over easy.
But I'll forgive this travesty.
You're lucky to have a man like me.'

Fran's heart emptied and rage did fill it

Her hands clasped around that cast-iron skillet
And before she could contemplate right or wrong,
The kitchen echoed with a ringing, “BONG!!!”
Then, utter silence fell in the room,
Along with a quickly thickening doom.
“this isn’t a dream,” thought Frustrated Fran,
“I just killed my husband with a frying pan.”

Fran lowered the pan into the sink with care,
And washed off the bits of bone, blood and hair.
“No use panicking.” The water got redder.
“take your time girl, he won’t get any deader.”

Fran poured herself some hot, strong tea.
And decided what the new plan would be.
Plan A: call 911
And tell them exactly what she’d done.

Then, go to jail for the rest of her life,
Forever known as a murderous wife.
Fran thought she’d go with Plan B instead,
And live the life she should’ve led.

Fast forward now a week or three,
The cops have sent out an APB.
Fran covered her tracks, but it doesn’t matter,
CSI’s figured it out from the blood spatter.

But Fran was smart, and flush with cash,
Taken from her secret stash.
She dyed her hair and hopped on a plane,
Never to be seen or heard from again.

On a sub-tropic island there happens to be
A shabby-chic shanty down by the sea.
A lovely lady lays in the sun to tan,

But nowhere to be found is Frustrated Fran.

Take Me Home by Kat Fullerton

Take me home
And lay me down
Let's take a ride
To Sexytown
You got what I need
To scratch that itch
Slap my ass
And call me a bitch
Handcuff me to the radiator
Forget about me until three weeks later
Bury me somewhere out in the woods
Oh yeah baby, you got the goods
Make sure no one can see me for miles and miles
So I end up on Cold Case Files
Make sure they use a good photo, you know
One from twenty pounds ago
This turns me on, I don't know why
I think I watch too much CSI

Turning by Shay Darrach

The revolver named Death didn't look like much, reduced to its component parts and spread out across the table for cleaning. Liza Salt picked up the chamber and a cleaning rod, her hands moving through motions that were somewhere between routine and ritual. It didn't look like it could kill demons, no matter what shot you put in it. It just looked like a revolver, like any of the dozen others her late husband had made; none of them would keep her safe from the turned men when the time finally came.

"It don't take much for a man to let a demon take his heart, when he's workin' so hard to build with so little. His head's already full of promises - promises of land, gold, freedom - so what's one more? ... Problem is, sometimes, often enough that folks talk about it - demons keep their promises. They give you what you asked for; ain't their fault if men don't ask about the price."

Colby's voice rattled on in her head. She could almost see him pacing the workroom, his big voice booming and his hands trying to make his points for him. Weren't no ghost, though: was just her own mind filling in the blank space where he should've been. He'd been bound and determined to do something about it - about this blight of demons and turned men he saw spreading across the land - even if it got him killed.

And so it had.

Sighing, Liza pushed a wisp of hair back over her ear, leaving a smear of gun oil on her cheek. Weren't bad enough Colby was dead neither; his crazy faith had cost the Bell family two daughters (though Liza was inclined to count the daughters as lost from the time they took up gunslinging; demon-hunting had just hastened their end): one dead by a demon's hands, and the other gone plain crazy from the sight of it. Colby'd given

the girls Death; all the revolver had done was live up to its name, Liza figured.

The demon had left the revolver with the mad girl, left her cradling it to her chest like some baby-doll while she sat, rocking back and forth beside her sister's body. Crueler than death; any man'd agree. Any man except a turned one with a demon in his heart.

Ain't no such thing as a magic bullet, nor a demon-killing gun, Colby Salt, no matter how good a gunsmith you are - were. Deftly, Liza reassembled the revolver and laid it in the centre of a clean handkerchief. I ain't got your faith, neither. All I got left is this curs'd thing.

"And a town full of turned men," said the voice that weren't her husband's ghost.

Folding her arms on the table, Liza put her head down and closed her eyes. And a town full of turned men. Men who'd sold their hearts and promised their souls to a demon; men who'd become walking corpses. Past time I moved on.

'Cept that was the problem: she couldn't just move on. The demon and the turned men let her live (she was pretty sure they thought it was funny, and were just biding their time 'til she stopped amusing them) but they wouldn't let her leave. She was a prisoner in her own house, mistress of a half-built gun factory.

And she was all out of ammunition.

"Mornin' Mrs Salt," Thomas called, all cheery like, as he rode up to the fence.

Liza didn't answer or pause in hanging out her wash. Was a game they played, these turned men, acting like nothing was wrong, nothing had changed. Like the town had always been home to a demon and the ghosts of those who'd fled.

"Brought you some milk and cheese - the Davies' cow started producin' again. Ain't much, but they wanted to share."

Hands on the clothesline, Liza wavered. She had hens and a well deep enough to grow a few veggies and keep her household from running dry while the land around turned to dust, but dairy was a rare treat. Her fingers tightened on a clothes-pin, and she straightened her back. Ramrod stiff, she walked over to the fence.

"Thank you, Thomas," she said curtly, accepting the basket he passed over.

He touched the brim of his hat and ducked his head. "My pleasure, Mrs Salt." His horse danced, bucking half-heartedly, and it took spurs and a heavy hand on the reins for him to bring it 'round to the fence again. Liza

watched impassively, wishing the horse better luck in losing its turned rider in future.

"It's a right shame, Ma'am," Thomas drawled. "You goin' it alone out here." His eyes were hot with demon-fire as he looked her over. "Don't have to be this way. There's a lady demon lookin' to move t'town. Says she'd rather -"

"Good day, Thomas." She knew what he was about to say. It wasn't the first time the offer had been made, though it had never been done so openly. Cradling the goods, she walked away.

"Aww, don't be like that! We's tryin' to do you a favour."

She bit her tongue on everything she wanted to say.

"Fine!" She barely heard him over his horse's pained whinny. "We'll see how much longer you last." And then he was gone, whipping his horse into a harder gallop than he had any need for.

At the front door Liza paused. Pulling back the scrap of cloth that covered the basket's contents, she regarded the rotting cheese and curdled milk with more resignation than surprise. Of course even the food had turned.

In a rare fit of frustration, she spun away from the door and hurled the basket out into the yard.

Liza woke in the night to the sound of heavy hooves and a wheel axle in need of grease. There wasn't much traffic on the road past the house; most of it was the impatient and unwilling horses of the turned men. She couldn't remember the last time she'd heard a cart go by, let alone a carriage. Sliding out of bed, she padded barefoot to the window. The floorboards trembled to the beat of hooves on dirt as she leaned against the frame and pulled the curtain aside.

It was black as a mine-shaft outside. A new moon skulked behind a layer of cloud that obscured the starlight. The rhythmic squeak of the axle slowed. Liza strained her eyes against the darkness, barely making out the deeper shadows of carriage and horses before she heard the whump of something falling to the ground. Cargo delivered, the carriage sped away.

Hugging her elbows, Liza padded into the kitchen. She lit a lantern, but its small light was no comfort. The revolver named Death lay on its black cloth, empty and waiting. It wasn't her only gun - and it was far from

her favourite - but they were all useless without shot. She picked it up on her way to the front door anyway.

A tentative knock came as she reached it. She glanced down to the line of salt that blocked the threshold. It was thinning, despite her best efforts to conserve it. Wasn't like the turned men were going to bring her more salt to keep them and the demons out. Wasn't like she really believed that the salt could keep them out - that'd been another notion of Colby's, and hadn't she teasingly argued that the power of their name should've been enough? - but it didn't do no harm, except for wasting salt.

The knock came again, stronger than before. She shook her head and squared her shoulders. Turned men and demons didn't knock. Revolver in hand, she threw back the locks and opened the door.

Jessie Bell - the gunslinger, the mad girl - huddled on Liza's doorstep, looking thin and frail and fit to shatter if you so much as raised your voice at her. Liza breathed her name and the girl offered her a smile like a knife.

"It's me, Mrs Salt. Ain't turned. God's own truth."

Liza nodded and took a step back. "Come in then," she said, gentle as if to a spooked horse.

Jessie stepped over the threshold. In the moment her foot was in the air, her eyes rolled back in her head and she shuddered. Liza raised the empty revolver and kept it trained on her as Jessie stepped inside.

The girl licked her lips. "Ain't turned, I swear's it. Here." She reached for Liza's hand.

Reluctantly, Liza stepped forward and let her take it and place it on her chest. The girl's heart beat too fast beneath her palm; proof enough that she hadn't sold her heart to the demon. "Where've you been, Jessie?"

Jessie tossed her head. "Places." Liza didn't lower the gun. Licking her lips again, Jessie said, "Red Deer. My folks.... "

Liza nodded and motioned for her to go into the sitting room. "I imagine they'd want the best they could afford. But that's a real long way. The hospital in Red Deer's not the kind that cures crazy folks."

"No," Jessie whispered, perching on the edge of a chair. "Ain't cured. Ain't run away, neither," she said defiantly, raising her chin.

Liza stood watching her; small tremors made the girl's hands and head twitch worse than a fidgeting child. Her dark hair was lank and stringy,

adding to the impression that she'd been stretched thin and long - all sinew and bone. "Why are you here, Jess?" She asked, as gentle as she could.

"...I had a dream," Jessie Bell said, her voice small and dark and hoarse. Liza tried not to sigh, but Jessie didn't even notice. "I dreamed I was dyin' and my sister's soul was waitin' for me. She sent me back - pushed me away-sayin' I had done wrong by her."

Jessie ducked her head, staring wide-eyed at her trembling hands. "An' I told her, weren't nothin' I could do. Told her I was... I was broken... And weren't no good tryin' to ask me to do anythin'. And she said - clear as day I heard her say it - she said, 'then find somebody who can'." Jessie laced her fingers together, but they still shook. "I told the doctors, 'course. They wanted me to tell 'em everythin', and then they was all worried that I was gettin' worse." Shoulders shaking, she shrunk in on herself. "So I told 'em: Just let me do this one thing. Let me go, and set it right somehow, and then I'll come back and let you poke at my brain or whatever else you think you need to do to fix me."

"Jessie..."

"I'm real sorry, Mrs Salt, but you was the only one I could think of."

"Jessie, there's nothing I can do."

Jessie shook her head, stubborn as a mule. "There's somethin', Mrs Salt. There has to be." Her eyes were too bright in the lantern's light; hot with a glow from inside. "Cuz the part I ain't told the doctors, ain't told no one, is this: we run'd out of them bullets Mr Salt made, and that last demon I killed... It was with some shot we scrounged." She got to her feet, reaching out to Liza. "Weren't the bullets, Mrs Salt; was Death. And now you got that gun and you can finish it."

Jessie's words were like cold water to her face. Liza shivered. "That don't...That doesn't make any sense, Jessie Bell. Why would the demon leave the gun with you, then?"

"Demons lie; it's all they do. Leavin' that gun with me was the biggest lie it could tell: that we had no power to hurt them."

The silence stretched long between them. Jessie's twitches had stopped and her eyes, fixed on the revolver named Death, were shining. Liza Salt felt old suddenly; every joint in her body ached, right down to her fingers where they curled around the revolver.

"What am I supposed to do, Jessie?" Liza asked. Her voice rattled dry in her throat.

The mad girl slunk back down onto the chair like a whipped dog. "Don't got no idea, Mrs Salt," she replied sullenly. "You're the sane one. You got the gun."

Liza took a deep, slow breath, wishing she could pray to God. She had no faith left; not in God, not in man. The only thing you could believe in out here was dust, and the emptiness of promises.

"Go home, Jessie Bell," she said. "Go back to your folks, who've already lost one daughter. Go back to the people who can make you whole."

Sliding out of her chair, Jessie edged toward the door. "Ain't nobody who can do that, Mrs Salt. Ain't no such thing as whole." And she spat, crude as the gunslinger she'd tried to be, on Liza Salt's floor, and then she was gone, out into the moonless dark.

"You've sent her to her death," said the voice that wasn't Colby's ghost.

"She was a dead thing already," Liza replied, and went to lock up again.

It was a full three days later when Thomas came riding up to her fence again. "Gotta thank y'kindly, Mrs Salt," he said, sawing at his horse's mouth to keep it from bolting.

The pulley above the well squealed as Liza hauled the bucket clear of the stone wall. Setting the bucket aside, Liza wiped her forehead on her sleeve. Dust was thick on her skin and beginning to collect on the surface of the water. "What reason do you have to thank me, turned man?" She asked, but oh, she could feel a chill that had nothing to do with the hot air blowing across her damp skin.

Thomas grinned, showing a mouth full of blackened teeth. "Sendin' that girl into town was a right nice gesture on your part. Maybe we been misjudgin' you."

"I've done you no favours, turned man," Liza replied sharply. Hoisting the bucket up to her hip, she unclipped the rope and headed for the house.

"Let me get that for you, Ma'am," Thomas said, hurrying to dismount. He kept one arm clamped tight across his chest, like it was paining him, but the end of his sleeve flapped empty.

"You stay outside my fence, you--"

"Fine, fine!" Leading his horse, the turned man kept pace with her. "All's I wanted to do was let you know you'd be as welcome in town as the girl was."

At the front door, Liza paused. She looked at him across the dusty, barren yard and the weather-beaten fence and wondered how much of his arm was missing and which of the others had chewed it off. "And so you have. Be gone."

The turned man was laughing as he swung back up into the saddle. "And a good day to you, too, Mrs Salt."

Carrying the bucket inside, Liza kicked the door closed behind her. She set the bucket on the kitchen table too hard, and watched dust-coloured water slop over the edges and onto the old wood.

Jessie Bell was in the demon's nest. And a lady-demon had been looking for a host.

Didn't matter how or why the girl had gotten there ("...you told her to go..." whispered the voice that wasn't Colby's), she'd suffered enough at the hands of demons and turned men.

Shoving her sweat-damp hair back, Liza strode into the bedroom. Flinging the wardrobe doors open, she hauled out breeches and coat and her husband's old hat. She changed her clothes, tugged on her sturdiest boots, and buckled on a holster. Heading back into the kitchen, she packed salt into the six chambers of Death's barrel.

"Old Lady Salt to the rescue," the ghost-voice laughed, as she stalked out to the barn.

"Jessie was right -" she said, mostly to herself, while she tacked up her mare, "- there's no one else."

That didn't stop her hands from sweating on the reins.

"-Salt's a-comin'."

"Mrs Salt's a-comin'."

"Salt-"

"...Salt..."

The whispers ran ahead of Liza as she rode into town. Men stepped out from every door, alone or in small groups: from the General Store to the Saloon, to the Barber Shop and the Hotel. They lined the street, thumbs

tucked in their gun-belts, leaning against the worn wooden pillars of the few businesses, spitting tobacco juice as they watched her with burning eyes.

Liza barely spared them a glance. Her mare tossed her head, eyes rolling wild and white at the turned men, but she walked steady beneath Liza's gentle hand. Her destination lay at the end of the street: the two-room structure that had been schoolhouse during the week and church on Sundays. The once white-washed boards had been scoured bare and worn rough by the incessant dust, so that the building looked fit to collapse in a heap of splinters beneath a strong wind.

At the invisible line where the fence had once stood, Liza dismounted. Dropping the reins to the ground, she took the mare's head in her hands and whispered calm encouragement to her. Leaving her ground-tied, Liza walked up to the building.

There was no door; only a hole that gaped into unnatural darkness. Drawing her revolver, Liza stepped across the threshold.

"Well, look who's here," the demon said from the shadows, "If it isn't Mrs Elizabeth Salt." Flame sparked from his finger. The smell of sulphur clouded the air as he lit a cigarette.

"Demon," Liza replied, with a tip of her hat.

"You're right proper today." The demon's drawl was a bitter mockery. Behind him, someone lit a lantern and set it on the floor. The feeble light only cast the demon into deeper shadow. His dimly glowing eyes watched her through the smoke rising from his cigarette.

"I came with a request," Liza replied. "Might as well be civil about it."

"Oh?" Flicking ash, the demon gestured for her to step into the next room. "Do tell."

Liza stood her ground. "Give Jessie Bell back to me, and let us leave town."

The demon waited, but only silence filled the pause. "That's it?" He asked. "What's in it for me?"

"Don't see as how I need to offer a powerful demon like you anything. That'd be insulting."

"Would it?" Raising a hand, the demon beckoned someone forward. "What do you think, my sweet?"

Jessie Bell sidled out of the darkness and pressed herself up against the demon. He looped an arm around her shoulders, smiling down at her around his cigarette. But she was looking at Liza, and her eyes were rolling wild like Liza's mare's.

"You don't belong here, Jessie Bell," Liza said sternly. "You spit that demon out and come away with me now."

"I won't be gotten rid of so easily," the lady-demon who'd stolen Jessie's skin replied. She licked her lips. "You'd make a better vessel. Won't lie about that. This one's... A little cracked."

Liza drew her revolver. The demons laughed.

"Is that your answer Mrs Salt? A gun? I thought you'd learned better."

"Maybe I have," Liza replied softly. The demon in Jessie's skin was fidgeting, looking around the room like she expected someone to interrupt them. "But I put a bullet in my husband when he turned. Don't think I won't do the same for her."

"Her?" The demon puffed out a last cloud of smoke and dropped his cigarette. Crushing it under his boot-heel, he shook his head. "She's not turned; she's possessed. There's a difference."

"I know." Liza took careful aim.

The demon's flame-bright eyes darted from her to Jessie and back again. "Now, now, Mrs Salt. All you're going to do is make her mad."

"I'm already mad," Jessie, not the lady-demon, but Jessie herself, whispered.

Liza swept back the hammer and fired quick enough to make any gunslinger proud but the demons were quicker. Her salt-shot hit Jessie in the arm, and the lady-demon shrieked as it poured out of Jessie's mouth. The girl collapsed, clutching at her wound. The other demon pounced on Liza, wrestling her for the revolver.

"We gave Colby Salt everything, told him how to make this weapon, his heart's desire," he hissed, his breath stinking hot in Liza's face. Up close, the demon looked old; as thin and dry and ancient as the land outside. "Do you really think we'd give him a gun that could kill us?"

The hot mouth of the revolver's barrel burned into the demon's skin, directly over his heart. Liza held it there with every ounce of strength she had. If the demon had meant to shock her with the revelation about Death, he'd failed. Nothing could surprise her about her turned and dead husband

any more. Looking the demon straight in the eye, she said, "Yes, I think you would," and she fired again.

The salt tore through the demon's chest and he staggered backwards, keening at a pitch that was almost painful. Resisting the urge to clap her hands over her ears, Liza fired again, into the seething black cloud of the demon emerging from the dead man's body. It contracted around the salt and shattered, spraying black powder in all directions.

Liza hid her face behind her arm, trying not to breathe. She stepped backwards, blindly, and nearly tripped over Jessie, who'd been crawling toward the door.

"This town was dead anyway," the bodiless lady-demon hissed from the shadows. "Good luck getting out. You've got, what... four shots left?"

Aiming Death, Liza fired again. The demon shrieked. "Two," Liza said grimly, the word almost lost in the howl of the rising wind. Crouching down, she pulled out a handkerchief and twisted it around Jessie's arm. Liza helped the girl to her feet, and they stumbled across the threshold into a dust storm the likes of which she'd never seen.

Turned men staggered toward them, struggling against the wind that was sucking the church down a pit toward Hell. Liza refused to look back, just kept dragging Jessie forward, away from the chaos of the demon's nest collapsing. Dust scoured her face; the wind drew her hat-cord choking tight against her throat, and stole the air from her lungs. Jessie tugged at her, and it took Liza far too long, and yet only a few agonizing steps, to realize the girl wasn't just collapsing again. Liza threw herself to the ground, holding Jessie close, as the wind screamed and turned men screamed and the world disappeared behind a wall of grit.

Groaning, Liza rubbed at her dust-smeared eyelashes with fingers that weren't any cleaner. Forcing her bleary eyes open, she blinked at the world. It was night; clear, crisp air filled her lungs as she drew a deep breath and coughed her throat raw. She sat up, not trusting her legs to hold her yet, and tried again to wipe the dust away. It was only as she scrubbed at her face with both hands that she realized she'd lost the revolver.

Her hands stilled. She waited for some angry or sarcastic comment from the voice that wasn't Colby's ghost, but only silence rang loud in her ears.

A sliver of a moon hung above them, casting thin light on the scene. The church building was gone, vanished as completely as if it had never been. They were surrounded by a ring of corpses: turned men, dropped dead. Liza got shakily to her feet and moved slowly in a circle, looking at the men she'd known; men who had once been friends and allies in building the town.

Their features were peaceful.

"Mrs Salt?" Jessie Bell was sitting up, ghostly pale and holding her wounded arm carefully.

Liza looked at her, and nodded, just once.

"What do we do now?" The mad girl shivered. "It's cold."

"Winter's coming," Liza said, helping Jessie up. "We move on."

Sarah's "to-do" List by Samantha Porter

After dropping Thomas off at nursery Sarah rushed to the dentist for the root canal surgery she'd been putting off for months. After two hours of pain and discomfort in the chair, she then had the pain and discomfort of the bill. Another of life's irritating necessities that she didn't want to pay for, like nappies which stayed on Thomas's bottom for an average of two minutes before he filled them with his breakfast. She swore he waited deliberately for a fresh one before filling it up.

Unfortunately, Sarah didn't have time to moan about the injustice of it all to the dentist receptionist; she just had too much to do today. As she was driving she wondered if there was such a thing as a 10 week intensive dentistry course she could sign up to so she could open her own practice and charge £700 for two hours work to every poor unfortunate who walked through the door. So engrossed was she in her own thoughts about quick ways to make money, Sarah almost didn't see the car that performed an emergency stop in front of her. She braked suddenly and managed to miss the car by inches.

She put on her car's hazard lights then marched towards the driver side of the other car. "Wa uh fluck ooya fring woor wooing woo funt!!"

The two men in the vehicle looked silently at Sarah, then at each other, then back at Sarah. "Sorry, I just missed my turning. Are you ok love?" They waited for a moment for Sarah to answer, but realising that she was struggling used it as an opportunity to escape. As they drove away and quickly wound up the window the two men looked at each other again and burst out laughing

Sarah was left standing in the road with an accidental glob of spit on her chin. She knew it was going to be one of those days. You know the type, the ones where you just knew you should have stayed in bed because it started off bad and was getting

worse by the minute, but as much as she desperately wanted to go home and put her feet up she had urgent errands to run. Besides...if she sat down and had a cup of tea, she'd only dribble it down her lap.

Trying to set the SatNav to High Beach, Sarah desperately wished she wasn't so hopeless with modern technology. She sort of knew where High Beach was but usually just happened upon it on her way to somewhere else. So to avoid getting lost, and mindful of time restrictions, she allowed herself to be guided by Darth Vader. If she wasn't so useless she could change the voice or at least turn the volume down.

20 minutes later Darth advised her that she had "Reached the dark side"; she was actually at what could loosely be described as a car park. In truth it was more a clearing in the forest, the sort where people came of an evening to watch bored marrieds having sex with each other. Luckily this was 11am and the place was empty. Sarah parked, turned off the engine and opened her door. She sat there for a moment allowing the breeze to wash over her and took a deep breath. She could hear the birds in the forest and the occasional distant sound of cars passing the main road a few hundred yards away.

Had this been any other day she might have allowed herself the luxury of half an hour's relaxation, perhaps read a few chapters of the latest romantic novel she'd borrowed from the library or attempt and fail to finish the crossword as she always did. But today was different, she had errands to run. With that she got out of the car and opened the boot.

Despite the near miss half an hour earlier, he was still there in pretty much the same position she'd dumped him the previous night. His arse was pointing slightly upwards in a position that brought a smile to Sarah's face. If her father had been standing there next to her he would have looked down at Marcus's dead body and commented on how he needed somewhere to park his bike. Dad always saw the funny side, but she suspected even he might find it rather alarming that his precious daughter had murdered her husband.

She continued to look at Marcus's corpse and was a little surprised about how she was feeling. After five years of a marriage she thought she might feel a bit sad about killing him, but the only feeling she had at that moment was one of extreme irritation. Why was it so difficult to get rid of a dead body and why were they so bloody heavy?

Sarah and Marcus bought their house three years ago, Marcus had been sold on the fact that it had an integral garage. He liked the idea that he could go straight from the house, into the garage and into the car without getting

cold or having to defrost the windscreen during winter months. If only he'd known that at the same time Sarah was thinking how convenient it would be when she needed to haul his body noisily and clumsily through the house and into the boot of the car without the neighbours being suspicious.

The problem with Marcus was that he would never listen to Sarah. She'd endured five years of mental torture that eventually pushed her over the edge. You see, cups have no business being upside down. What if the cupboard was dirty and the germs got on the rim of the cups? Of course, it wasn't just about upside down cups. To kill someone for putting cups in the cupboard the wrong way would be totally insane. No, there was the toilet roll as well...that was the final straw for Sarah. Everyone knows that toilet rolls need to be put on the holder so you pull from the front and was it too much to ask for Marcus to fold the edges in to a neat triangle when he finished?

Sarah grabbed hold of Marcus's legs and pulled him out of the car. He landed with a thud on the earth beneath him. With all her strength she dragged him into the nearby forest, having to stop every few minutes to catch her breath. She found a nice spot near a tree, dropped his legs to the ground and took a last look at him.

She had to admit, he looked really pissed off, but she supposed you probably would be a bit fed up if your wife smashed you over the head with a hot iron, left you dead in the boot of the family car over night with your arse in the air, then dumped you in a forest.

During the drive back towards town she wondered for a moment just how long she had before someone found her husband's body and how long it would be before the police came for her. Maybe the foxes and mice would eat the evidence, but even Sarah knew that it didn't matter how hungry the wildlife were in the forest, they weren't likely to get through a 12 stone accountant overnight. Mind you, they never found her first husband...or his mother.

The 'to do' list in Sarah's mind now had a mental tick beside "Clear rubbish out of car boot." Next on the list, Tesco's. Now what to get for Thomas's tea.

She lives in the deep by Rosanne Rabinowitz

Suzy runs out of the apartment, down the stairs and into the alley. She squints against the brightness of the snow as she emerges in the back yard of her building. Everything at home was grey and brown. It made her feel as if her head and chest were stuffed, like she had a bad cold though she didn't have to sneeze.

Surrounded by the white, she can breathe again. This is white like the paper she found on a shelf, just waiting for her to add colours with the crayons she got for Hanukah. White is better than the grey carpet in the living room, or even the black and white speckled floor that is cold against her cheek when she hides under the kitchen table.

First she knocks on the door of Alice and Don's apartment, downstairs near the yard so they can look after the building. When there's no answer she looks in the window. All the lights are off and the parakeets' cage isn't in the usual place.

Then she remembers that Alice and Don are visiting grandchildren in Connecticut, and they must've taken the parakeets with them.

After school Suzy usually comes down to play with the birds. One parakeet is Sally, the other is Bluebell. But they are both light blue and white. Alice lets them out of their cage and they fly around her apartment.

Suzy's fuzzy green jacket is already spotted with snow. As the green clumps turn to frosted bobbles she thinks of lime ices, a treat from summer in the middle of winter. She tips her head back and watches the flakes swirl down, drifting from a funnel in the sky. She hears stray notes of church music and singing, stupid stuff that was on every channel this morning. It must come from a TV upstairs. There's nothing else on TV because

today is Christmas. Diver Dan should be on tonight, but her mother said he was taken off for a Christmas special.

Then she sees a dab of colour like a leaf in the sky, yet the trees are bare of any leaves. It contains green and blue, like the eye shadow that her almost-grown-up cousin Shelley wears or a shade she mixes with her crayons. And it moves up and down, settling on a tree next door.

Suzy runs and slides towards the wall that runs between the yards. It darts among the sparrows as if it's another bird. But this is the colour of birds that live near the sea, birds of paradise with feathers in every shade between blue and green. All these birds live down south in Florida, along with pink birds called flamingos. Birds of paradise can't live outside in the Bronx because it's too cold and it snows in winter.

Then the spot of colour disappears as if snuffed out. Suzy peers at the trees, searches for it again in the funnel of snowflakes. They keep coming down from a place she can't see, and that may be where the bombs fall from too.

Just before vacation all the kids had to hide from these bombs at school. Everyone got in line when a bell rang. But instead of going outside for a fire drill, they sat down on both sides of the hall. They had to put their heads between their knees.

What kind of drill is that? If there was a fire, we'd get burned, Suzy said to a teacher.

It's a shelter drill in case we get attacked. We can get attacked from Cuba.

Where's Cuba, and how come they're attacking us?

You ask too many questions. Put your head down and keep quiet.

"He lives in the deep with adventure and danger..." Suzy sang into the low crotch of her thick red ribbed tights.

Put your head down.

She sings that song again: "He lives in the deep with adventure and danger, that's where you find Diver Dan." Diver Dan is her favourite show. He wears a big round helmet on his head and bubbles come out of it when he breathes under the water. He meets a crew of creatures like Minerva the mermaid, Goldie the goldfish and Baron Barracuda with his funny accent and a mouth full of big teeth.

Whatever happens, Diver Dan is comfy in his suit. Suzy would love to have her own diving suit and helmet. No one can punch you in that suit – not even her brother. No one can tell what you're thinking. You can blow bubbles.

Diver Dan's suit will keep her warm in the snow. Maybe it will protect her from bombs.

Christmas tree lights blink on and off in windows. Snowflakes catch their colours, showing tints of green, red and pink that change with the lights. In other windows there are menorahs with the eight candles, but they aren't as pretty as the Christmas lights. She can't see her own window from the back yard, but it would have the eight candles too.

Her brother told her that Jewish people get Judah Maccabee coming down on the dumbwaiter with their presents, instead of Santa Claus down the chimney. Judah Maccabee led a rebellion against the ancient Greeks, who are usually good guys – but not in this story.

Suzy doesn't believe in Judah and the dumbwaiter, but she drew a picture of this for school. She showed the dumbwaiter moving on its pulleys down the shaft between the apartments, Judah crouching with a shield and a little skirt that warriors from Greek times wore. She mixed the gold crayon with sparkles from her art kit to make the skirt look like metal. Still, she was sure that people would laugh if he wore that skirt in New York.

The sun starts to shine through the snow. Crystals gleam at the end of her eyelashes where flakes are sticking. She blinks and then they're gone, but there are sparkles everywhere the sun meets the snow. They are sharp and glitter like pieces of broken glass, but so small they can also be soft like powder. You wouldn't see that in Florida.

There are good things about New York. The flat cakes at the bakery called black-and-whites, one half chocolate and one half vanilla. Alice and Don downstairs.

And there's the speck of green-blue again, hopping onto a tree closer to Suzy. Now she sees it is a bird. A parakeet! She wants to jump and shout about it, but she doesn't want to frighten the bird. Finding a parakeet in the Bronx is a better miracle than the Hanukah story about the oil burning in a temple for eight days.

If birds eat seeds, they must eat nuts. Suzy had some nuts in her pocket. Nuts are the only Christmas-y thing her parents like, and they put them in a bowl in the living room especially for company.

She tries to get the nuts out of the pocket, but the thick wool of her mitten makes it hard. When she takes it off she's able to grab a few, though they come out with bits of tissue. She holds out her hand with the nuts.

Alice showed her how to offer Fluffy and Bluebell treats so they came to sit on her finger. But maybe these nuts are too big. If Alice was here,

she'd have bird food. Suzy hopes that Alice and Don will come back from vacation soon.

But that will also mean she'll be in school again. School smells of wet clothes, even when it's sunny. Miss Henderson the teacher says this is real school, not kindergarten and everyone must behave. She scolds Suzy because she looks at birds and squirrels in the tree outside, not at the book with Dick and Jane.

If it's nice out, they all go to the playground after lunch. They don't run around, but stand in lines. A teacher tells them if a line isn't straight enough. The swings and monkey bars in the playground are still and empty, while the kids stand in their lines and look at them.

If it's too cold or if it's raining, they sit in the classroom.

The snow has stopped and more birds come out to screech and chatter above her. These are winter birds, city birds. They hop across snow and ice as they peck, peck at the frozen ground or the bark of the naked trees next door.

The house on the other side has a real back yard with dirt and trees – not all cement like her yard. The people who live there must be rich, because only rich people get to live in houses instead of apartments.

The parakeet joins the birds perched on the barbed wire between the pointed poles on top of the wall. The layers of blue and green on its chest change as the bird moves, just like cousin Shelley's eye shadow.

Shelley must be the most glamorous woman in the world, second only to Jackie Kennedy. Shelley sometimes lets Suzy watch when she puts on her eye shadow. First the blue, then green. Her eyes remind Suzy of those pictures from National Geographic. Hot oceans where Diver Dan lives, where shimmering fish all the colours of eye-shadow and stained glass swim. There are big birds with curved, heavy beaks like swords, others that step like ballerinas on long skinny legs. Everything in Diver Dan is only black and white, but she knows there really is blue and green in the ocean, and birds so pink it would keep her warm in the winter just looking at them.

Suzy had been watching birds when she got into trouble at school. She hadn't been shouting or even talking after lunch. She was just looking out the window. The sky was growing darker as drops dotted the glass. Rain, not

snow. The other kids were arguing about whether it would snow for Christmas.

Stop that racket, Miss Henderson shouted. Or you won't go out! When Suzy started school she used to think Miss Henderson was beautiful with her pink cheeks and smooth white hair that flipped up at the ends.

Plump drops of water started to splat against the window, and branches moved as if the drops were hitting them hard from above.

The other kids didn't keep quiet for long. Not when it was almost time for vacation.

Miss Henderson banged a paperweight on her desk with a loud crack. Suzy, maybe you can tell us why we won't go outside today!

The answer was simple. It's raining.

The pink in Miss Henderson's cheeks grew deeper and stopped looking pretty. Don't be a smart aleck! Do you know what happens to children who talk back?"

But it was raining. The raindrops were coming faster. As everyone turned to look at Suzy, you could hear them hit the window.

Miss Henderson sprang from behind her desk and yanked Suzy by the arm. Out you go! She made Suzy stand by the wall just outside the classroom. Stay there with your head down! She left the door partly open.

Suzy leaned against the wall. She clenched her fists at her sides. She really wanted to punch Miss Henderson. Right in the nose, and give her two black eyes. Tears stung her own eyes but she wouldn't let them out. She didn't want anyone to think she was sad.

Then Suzy heard loud voices, echoing in the corridor. She didn't want anyone to see her, but there was nowhere to go.

Two big boys walked by, arms swinging. They held passes, pieces of wood painted with their classroom number. It meant that they had permission to be outside the class.

One boy pointed his pass at her like a gun. But he sounded friendly when he asked why she'd been put out of the class, as if this had happened to him too.

Because I said it's raining, she told him.

The classroom door opened all the way, and Miss Henderson came out.

Who are you talking to, Suzy? You were sent out to be punished, not to socialise. Put your head down!

Did the parakeet fly out a window, is it lost? But the emerald-and-blue bird chirps and squawks along with the others, like it belongs.

Suzy makes a chirping sound back, like Alice does for Sally and Bluebell.

She'll call the bird Jackie, the name of the girl who sits near Suzy in school. Jackie from school has the same name as the President's wife and she's Protestant. Suzy had never met a Protestant before. Everyone else is either Catholic or Jewish.

Suzy wanted to be Catholic when she saw other girls outside their church, princesses in frilly white dresses with lace and veils. But the black-shrouded nuns are scary, so later she decided didn't want to be Catholic after all. It's better to be Jewish even if Judah doesn't come down the dumbwaiter. It means she can be outside today.

"Here Jackie! Here Jackie! Look what I have for you!" She extends her hand further.

Jackie cocks her head. The other birds ignore Suzy, but Jackie understands.

"Jackie, Jackie, I have a treat. It's fun playing in the snow. But soon you'll need to get warm. And you can come home with me."

The bird just looks at her. Maybe she doesn't trust people.

"It'll be warm inside," Suzy promises.

But when she thinks of inside, it also feels cold even when the radiators like big accordions bang and huff as heat fills them. It's a chill worse than ice and snow. It pushes her down though she is still able to talk and walk around. Something is waiting, on the outside of what she can see. In the deep, with danger. Put on your helmet, get behind the metal and the glass. Blow a bubble and hide.

When she goes home, she thinks of a danger crouching in the corner or stretched under the bed. Sometimes she hears it in sirens coming from the street, a stern voice lingering after a dream. At school she hears it in the clang of bells.

If she gets a suit like Diver Dan and blow bubbles from her round helmet, she'll be safe. Blow a bubble now, into the snow. It will turn to ice

on your lips, coat them like the frost on her green jacket. You can lick it and it will be like breathing. Perhaps she can turn into a fish that lives under the ice.

Sometimes the kitchen table can be her real house. The waxy checked tablecloth hangs down around her, making it dark, making it her own. She puts her face close to the floor and the dots on its covering – the linoleum – turn into another kind of picture. The floor isn't dirty because Mom washes it every day.

But she couldn't hide there for long. Not when her brother ripped the tablecloth off and brought dishes crashing into thick pieces around her. It was her fault, her mother shouted and hit in sharp little slaps. Then her father hit some more in big whacks. Suzy closed her eyes and thought about floating through water surrounded by bubbles. That worked when she was punished for drawing on Daddy's white paper.

Her mother says that parents who love their children tell them if they're bad and teach them right from wrong. People who don't care about their children let them run wild. Sometimes her mother looks in magazines with parents and kids on the cover, which must tell her these things. The kids have blonde hair and they're always smiling with big white teeth, like Baron Barracuda.

Alice often sings to Fluffy and Bluebell, so Suzy starts singing a song from Mom and Dad's Weavers record: "It's the hammer of jus-tice, it's the bell of free-eee-dom, it's the song about the love between my brothers and my sisters..." She likes that song, though she doesn't love her brother and wishes he'd leave her alone.

Last year a teacher asked them to bring a favourite record to school and Suzy brought in the Weavers. The teacher took Suzy aside and said in a whisper: don't you know those people are Communists?

But all four Weavers look very friendly on that record cover, especially the fat guy. The lady wears a shiny sleeveless black dress. Her head is thrown back and her mouth is wide open to let the song out.

Suzy leans her head back like the lady from the Weavers as she sings. She thinks of notes floating out of her mouth, black wiry ones that a bird can perch on.

Jackie perks up and looks interested, but stays where she is.

Suzy keeps singing, and sees those notes growing and growing until they're big enough for her to sit on too. She can perch there with Jackie, and they'll float away on a note to Florida or to Mexico.

Sometimes her father goes to work near Mexico. Last time he went there Suzy asked why Daddy is away. It has to do with a war, Mom told her.

But wars are full of soldiers and tanks and there's nothing like that in the Bronx. She asked in school if they were fighting a war, but the teacher said there was no war.

What about the shelter drills?

That's just in case.

In case of what?

What does Daddy do at work? Suzy asked her mother, because the teacher had told them to draw a picture of their father at work. Her mother was at work too, ironing sheets and her father's white shirts.

He's an engineer. He works on ammunition for the army.

You mean, like bombs?

Yes.

Suzy waited to hear more. But Mom went back to her ironing, letting loose a cloud of steam that said shhhhh.

Suzy's neck is getting sore and she's forgetting the words to the Weavers' song, so she stops singing and goes back to making bird-sounds. Jackie lets out a squawk and hops off her branch to the end of the wall, but she's still too far away. Suzy wishes she lived next door. If she can't run away as far as Florida, she'll move next door in the spring when the tree close to the wall blooms with pink-and-white flowers. She'll be big enough to climb over that wall, barbed wire and all.

But Don's stepladder is now leaning against the wall, its steps filled with snow. If she gets on that, she'll see into the other yard and be closer to Jackie. Still holding out the nuts, Suzy stamps and pushes the snow off the steps. At the top she's able stretch her hand and her arm just over the barbed wire. It doesn't hurt when her sleeve rests on top of it.

"Jackie!" She calls softly, and whistles. "Come here....Jackie!" She makes the noises, half-kissing, half-clucking.

The bird hops closer along the wall, staring with keen little eyes at Suzy's palm.

Kiss, cluck, Jackie! Come. Here. Yes, that's it. Closer, come closer.

You must be patient if you're taming an animal. Suzy remembers Alice's advice.

You must stay still, and wait. And Suzy looks at the sky where Jackie came from. She thinks about round black bombs shining as they slide through the funnel with the snow.

She once drew a picture of the bombs for school when they had to show their Dads at work. Her father was standing at a conveyor belt full of bombs. Suzy worked carefully, making them shine. Her father had a big smile as his hands moved among them. But bombs have white strings so you can light them. Maybe Daddy's putting the string in. That's his job.

She gave some bombs strings, and left some without. The teacher put the picture on the wall.

A few days later she brought her drawing home to Mom.

That's nice, she said. Is that Daddy making a cook-out when we go to the bungalow with Aunt Sarah and your cousins?

It's not a cook-out, Suzy almost said. Then she stopped. You don't talk about bombs.

Yeah. Those round black things are the coals and he wants to cook hamburgers.

It wasn't a lie. People are allowed to make up their own stories about pictures. But it would be a lot easier to show Uncle Ben driving his taxi, or Uncle Ralph bringing milk to people.

Snow starts falling again. It dots her palm, starts to cover the nuts. Her fingers are cold.

Jackie takes another hop forward.

Kiss, kiss! Suzy adds a chirrup. Jackie jumps to attention. Oh yes, you want a nut.

Come closer, closer. Now Jackie answers her call, giving a hop and a chirp after each noise Suzy makes.

Suzy moves closer too, just a little. She steps forward on her ladder. The wire catches on her jacket, exposing her arm to the cold. But it doesn't matter. Jackie's almost there. Just a little closer, Jackie will eat from her hand. She can feel the feathered body on her palm, the little heart beating. The bird will snuggle into her hand and warm it better than her mitten.

You're almost...

Suzy's snow boots slip.

Jackie!

The stepladder falls from under her feet and she pitches forward. Spots of blood stain the snow as a new red and plum-coloured mouth opens at her wrist where the wire catches it. Such a deep red, like insides. But it doesn't really hurt, not now.

Keep your eyes on the sky, don't let Jackie disappear.

She is still reaching out with her other hand as the spot of green and blue disappears in the swirling funnel of snow.

Breaking the Spell by Stuart Young

Becky would never have done such a terrible thing if she hadn't been driven to it.

Normally she would have swallowed her resentment, burying it deep inside, twisting her guts into a cat's cradle of anger and bitterness. But this time Anita had pushed her too far. The bullying and the teasing, Becky couldn't take it anymore.

So she consulted her spellbooks and she turned Anita into a monster.

Music blared from the clock radio, signalling the start of another school day. The alarm clock needn't have bothered, Becky had been awake for hours; the prospect of suffering another day at the hands of Anita meant that she spent her nights with fears looming at her out of the shadows.

But today was different. Today her sleeplessness came from excitement. Today Anita would get what she deserved. A Chinese burn from conjuring, a spitball from sorcery, a wedgie from witchcraft.

Slipping out of bed Becky headed for the bathroom. Let's see how Anita liked it when everyone laughed at her, when all her friends deserted her. She deserved it; puberty was hard enough without people like Anita making it worse.

Yawning, Becky shuffled along the landing.

She wondered what form Becky's transformation would take. A tail perhaps. Or horns. Reluctantly she admitted to herself that the spell wouldn't be as effective as that. Since Anita had convinced the rest of the coven that witchcraft was a kiddie's game that only freaks and weirdos believed in Becky had only her own power to charge the spell. The best she could hope for was that Anita's smooth complexion would be plagued

by zits, or that her breasts would become flat and saggy like a pair of deflated soufflés or that she suffered a bad hair day, her blonde locks becoming a blow-dried haystack. Whatever it was Becky would be happy so long as Anita looked as ugly on the outside as she was on the inside.

Opening the bathroom door Becky reached for her toothbrush. As she did so she glanced at the mirror above the washbasin. She gasped in horror.

Something had gone terribly wrong with the spell.

A monster glared at Becky; bulging, multifaceted eyes; clicking mandibles; glistening scaly skin. Becky flinched away, sure that the monster would lunge at her, devouring her with its mucus flecked jaws. Then she realised that monsters don't normally wear Hannah Montana pyjamas.

The monster was her.

She shrieked in terror, her scream reverberating around the house.

Her father's sleepy voice drifted through the door. "If you've found a spider in the shower don't expect me to get rid of it. You're old enough to tackle them yourself by now."

She couldn't be a monster. She couldn't, she couldn't, she couldn't! Slowly her reflection shifted back to its usual shape.

"I-it's okay, Dad." Her voice wobbled like a jelly left to set during an earthquake. "It's not a spider."

"Good. Don't want any nasty creepy-crawlies running about the house, do we?"

Trembling, Becky slumped onto the toilet seat, tears leaking from her eyes. A familiar scene, one she had played out many times after run-ins with that bitch Anita. But normally the tears didn't make such a loud squelching noise when they hit the ground. Opening her eyes she saw a puddle of slime rippling around her feet. Razor sharp talons jutted from her toes, picking holes in the bathmat.

Yelping in terror she leapt off the toilet. Her hands flew to her mouth only for pincers to glance off a hardened carapace.

She was just imagining this. She had to be. It was all just a delayed hallucination from the time she got the nasal spray for her blocked sinuses mixed up with a magic marker.

Becky stared into the mirror. Her new monstrous form shimmered and she became human once more. Sobbing with relief she balled herself up in the corner of the bathroom. Then her face hardened. No one could know about this. Destroy the evidence. Grabbing a towel she mopped up the slime. Rolling up the tattered bathmat she crept back to her bedroom.

Why had the spell backfired? A frantic search through her spellbooks left her none the wiser.

Maybe it was just some kind of magical overspill. The main thrust of the spell had hit Anita but mystical feedback had somehow made it through the protective spell with which Becky always started her rituals. And if she looked this bad just from backwash then Anita must look truly hideous.

She had to see.

Standing outside the school gates Becky took a deep breath, pulled it right down to the bottom of her lungs, begged the cool air to soothe her nerves. Convincing herself to go to school was always something of an effort. Just the thought of the taunts and jeers she would have to endure made her feel ill -- Anita's insults were so vicious she had even driven Mr Henry, the history teacher, to a nervous breakdown. But today Becky required even more willpower than usual to enter the school. She had to use every last ounce of her strength to keep the slime oozing out of her pores. At least she hoped they were pores; some of them appeared to have teeth.

Fortunately if she concentrated hard enough her skin returned to its normal texture. It even stopped being purple. The hard ridges also disappeared from her brow, the clicking mandibles vanished from her jaws, pincers turned back into hands and the tentacles flicking out from the top of her head reverted to the usual mess of unruly curls and split ends.

Five minutes practicing in front of her makeup mirror told her she could switch between her human form and new monstrous shape at will. No one would ever know she was a monster so long as she maintained her concentration.

So she headed to school, only twenty-five minutes late, sitting on the bus with her eyes screwed up tight so nothing could distract her.

Arriving outside the school gates she gazed across the empty playground. Everyone would be in assembly right now, listening to the headmaster droning on about good character development. With luck Becky could get a quick glimpse of Anita to see how the spell had affected her and then bunk off school for the rest of the day to try and find a way to fix the transformation.

Of course if Anita looked half as bad as Becky then she wouldn't have turned up for school. She would be home in bed bawling her eyes out. In that case Becky would have to sneak round Anita's house and try and peep in the window. Some video footage on her camera-phone delivered to the

regional TV newsdesk would ensure Anita lived in misery for the rest of her life.

Becky crept along the deserted school corridors towards the assembly hall. Just a quick peep and she would be gone. No one would even know she had been there.

Just as she reached the doors they swung open and the entire school came trooping out.

Flattening herself against the wall she hid behind the door, shrinking from the ragged swarm of boys and girls as they giggled and gossiped and tried to trip each other up.

Concentrate. Don't turn into a slime-oozing monster. Concentrate.

Even if she remained human she would be buried beneath a barrage of abuse. The whole school followed Anita's lead in heaping ridicule on Becky; taunts and sneers piercing her soul. Fortunately everyone was too busy chatting to notice her.

'Did you see Anita this morning?'

"God, I almost died."

"I know!"

Becky frowned. If Anita had made it to school she couldn't look anywhere near as bad as Becky. Still, even if there had been a few hiccups with the spell if it was getting people to talk about Anita behind her back then it wasn't a complete failure.

Maybe Anita's teeth had gone all jutting and snaggly or even better her bottom had swollen up to the size of an overstuffed sofa.

Excited whispers ran through the gossiping teenagers, heralding Anita's approach. Becky peeked out from behind the door, eager to see just what damage the spell had wrought upon Anita's beauty.

Becky's eyes widened, her jaw dropped, stunned little whimpering sounds crawled from her throat.

Anita was more gorgeous than ever.

Glowing golden hair, dazzling smile, and a sway in her walk that emphasised all the right things about her svelte figure. She was such a knockout it was a wonder that all the other girls in the school hadn't become lesbians.

Shocked, Becky lost her grip on the door that shielded her from prying eyes. Worse, she lost her grip on her human form. Slime slithered from her

pores, pincers clicked and clacked in agitation.

Everyone turned to stare at her. She cringed, waiting for the screams, the terror, the abuse.

“Oh my god, it’s Becky.”

Disbelief swept over the faces of the assembled teenagers. Then the entire school swarmed towards her. They were going to kill her, they would beat her and drag her into the Design and Technology workshops to crack open her carapace then slice her into bits with hacksaws and roast the remains in the Home Economics ovens just to make sure she was dead.

She had time for one last wail of despair before hands grabbed at her.

“Wow, I love what you’ve done with your hair.”

“These nails are incredible. Are they stick-ons?”

“You’ve got to tell me what moisturiser you’re using.”

More and more compliments gushed forth, the praise never-ending. Becky gaped at the schoolkids in bemusement.

They loved her.

Laughter filled the classroom, rippling through the air like music, a concerto of mirth, a symphony of glee. Becky sat at its epicentre, the eddies of laughter spiralling out from her and through the other kids in the class. She had been in this situation many times before, too often in fact. This time though there was one crucial difference.

She was laughing too.

Sitting on her desk, feet resting on her chair, she held court over the classroom. Hesitantly at first, years of timidity tripping up her tongue, but soon her confidence grew. So did her audience. Most of the kids crowding round, eager to catch her every utterance, came from other classrooms, abandoning maths and history and geography in favour of listening to Becky.

Girls wanted fashion tips. Boys begged her for dates. Mr Bellows, the sarcastic biology teacher with dubious taste in ties gave her an A for her homework even though he never gave anyone an A, especially if, like Becky, they hadn’t actually done the homework.

Best of all Anita sat hunched in the corner. Alone. Ignored. Only the occasional ball of screwed up paper bouncing off her head indicated that anyone realised she existed.

No one saw her. No one cared. Except Becky.

She couldn't quite figure out why the spell caused everyone to adore the fact that she looked like something from a David Attenborough wildlife documentary and ignored Anita even though she looked like the hottest new Hollywood teen star (before they needed rehab). And she certainly didn't know how long the effect would last. But she meant to wring every last drop of enjoyment out of it.

As Becky answered a question from her audience she smiled sweetly at Anita. "No, I don't like miniskirts. They're ugly."

Anita wore a miniskirt. She glared daggers at Becky.

"And that thing where kids have their collars hanging open and shorten their ties so it looks like they've got a huge striped tongue lapping at their neck? Are they too stupid to tie it up properly?"

Anita fiddled with the huge wedge of school tie dangling from her open collar. Her glare intensified from daggers to machetes.

"As for tying up the front of your blouse to show off your midriff? Yuck!"

Anita folded her arms across her exposed midriff. Her glare went from machetes to chainsaws, the big kind like they used to chop down Amazonian rainforests.

Becky smiled at Anita. "Of course no one here would dress as sluttily as that."

Everyone followed her gaze, the shield of invisibility that surrounded Anita vanishing. Laughter exploded around Anita; cruel, mocking.

Anita leapt up, cheeks flaming bright red. "Stop it! Stop laughing at me!"

The laughter increased.

"I hate you! I hate you all!"

Mr Bellows waved a stern finger in Anita's direction. "That's enough, Anita. You've got an hour's detention."

"But sir –"

Two hours. And do something about that ridiculous ensemble you're wearing. It's supposed to be a school uniform, not a strippergram outfit."

Anita sank into her seat, seething. As she gazed at Becky her glare became a diamond-edged blade that could slice through atoms and dice reality.

Becky didn't notice. She was too busy laughing.

The spellbook's pages passed in a blur, words turning into a smeary inkblot, pictures dissolving into smudges of colour. Pincers really weren't designed for holding books. Sighing, Becky flipped back to the beginning and read through yet again, searching for what she needed.

Fun's fun but she didn't want to spend the rest of her life as a slime-oozing monster; there had to be a way to regain her human form. Unfortunately her spellbook offered no solutions, the rapid flicking of the pages as they rasped against her pincer produced a faint farting sound as if the book was blowing her a raspberry.

She still didn't understand why the spell had backfired so spectacularly. She had followed all the precautions she usually took when casting a spell.

1. Visualised a protective shield around herself.
2. Drawn a circle on the ground to ward off evil spirits.
3. Donned clean underwear in case the spell put her in hospital.

She had done everything.

Except...

She hadn't recited the Wiccan Rede. The sacred plea that should start all spells; "do what you will, so long as it harms none." Generally Becky considered this a very sensible thing to include in any magical endeavour, she didn't want to accidentally make someone's head explode or mystically barbecue next-door's cat. But it didn't seem very appropriate when conjuring up a curse to make a person's life as miserable as possible and so on this occasion she had chosen to omit it.

Of course some witches interpreted the phrase "None" as referring only to the person casting the spell. So if something had caused the curse to bounce off Anita the spell would have returned to Becky to find her without enough protection to withstand it.

Becky frowned. That still didn't explain why the curse had turned her into a monster while simultaneously making her the most popular girl in the school.

If the curse had hit Anita as intended it would have made her as hideous on the outside as she was on the inside. It would have ruined her popularity.

What if the feedback from the spell got scrambled by the limited magical protection Becky did have in place? Not enough to stop it, just to change its purpose. The curse still made its new target physically hideous but also revealed what she was really like as a person, in Becky's case amplifying all the best aspects of her personality so that everyone couldn't help but love her.

That made things even trickier. It meant Becky not only needed to remove her physical transformation but somehow also keep the adoration everyone now felt for her intact.

Well, not quite intact. If possible she would like to tone it down a little.

After all, she was being forced to do her magical research squatting in the girls' toilets while half the school pounded on the cubicle door screaming how much they worshipped her.

Physics: All the boys bought Becky flowers.

PE: Her team won at hockey even though her pincers kept slicing through the school's entire supply of hockey sticks.

Lunchtime: All the boys proposed to her.

Becky wondered if she could ditch her admirers by sneaking out of school. It's not as if any of the teachers would stop her. They were more likely to follow her, along with a group of cheering schoolkids. Even if she managed to ditch them what if everyone else she ran into treated her with the same fanatical hero worship? The entire town would be chasing after her, never giving her a moment's peace.

Only Anita remained unaffected by the spell. During PE she threw a tantrum after the fifteenth goal she scored against Becky was disallowed, just like all the others. Hurling her taped-up hockey stick to the ground she rounded on the other girls. "Why do you like Becky all of a sudden? Have you all gone mental? This is Becky. We all hate her!"

Everyone stared at her in much the same way the congregation of a mosque would look at someone who not only doodled a caricature of Mohammed onto the mosque's wall but also added a moustache and comedy spectacles. "No we don't."

"Yes you do! We all do!" Anita's voice was a shriek now; harsh, shrill. 'Last week at PE we stole her underwear and then told all the boys to

look up her skirt. The week before that we pelted her with balloons filled with piss. On our last field trip we forced her to walk around with a fridge magnet stuck to her braces saying “All Visitors Welcome.”

The girls closed in on Anita, hockey sticks raised menacingly. “Don’t talk about Becky like that.”

“Don’t you remember teasing her about being a witch? At the Halloween fancy dress party she had a broomstick and we covered it with itching powder then got her to sit on it for the runners-up photo. She was scratching so much the school nurse thought she had a STD. Don’t you remember? We called her Sabrina the Teenaged Itch.”

At this point Anita stopped talking and fled across the playing field, the girls in hot pursuit, brandishing their broken hockey sticks. Two hours later they had yet to return, the hunt still on.

With the entire school working as her personal bodyguard it was some time before Becky managed to slip away and consult her spellbook once more. Finally, she snuck into a supply cupboard to sit surrounded by copier paper, exercise books and paperclips as she read the spellbook by the light of her mobile phone. The pages shimmered in the faint glow, seeming even more magical than they already were. Rituals and incantations peeped out through the gloom, teasing her with their promise of power.

An hour and a half of intense study later and Becky had gained two things. Firstly, a blinding headache brought on by eyestrain. Secondly, the answer to how to reverse the spell.

Splicing a magic chant from chapter three with the visualization exercise from chapter five and the runes from chapter eight would have the desired effect. All she had to do was copy out the appropriate pages and integrate them into a single spell. Then everything would return to normal, the world would be sane again.

Before she could begin the door to the supply cupboard crashed open. Light flooded in, blinding her. As Becky’s eyes adjusted she saw a figure standing in the doorway. Anita. Sweating, panting, clothes tattered, skin torn and bruised, hair a tangled skein of barbed wire.

She did not look happy.

“You ...” Anita took a step forward.

“You ...” Her hands reached out, fingers brightly varnished talons.

“You ...” She stopped, staring at the sigils and symbols in the book. “This is how you did it, isn’t it? You little witch.”

Becky couldn’t let her have the book; she needed it to reverse the spell. Quickly she tried to hide the book behind her back.

Too late. Anita snatched it from her hands and raced down the corridor leaving Becky sitting in her little puddle of slime.

“I told you she was a witch, I told you!”

Becky could hear Anita’s gleeful cry as it echoed down the corridor. Desperately Becky leapt to her feet and sprinted after her. Bursting out of the cupboard she spotted Anita waving the book at a group of schoolkids who sat moping around the corridor.

The kids didn’t pay much attention to Anita, merely continued their moping, shoulders slumped, faces long as Blackpool pier. Some of them were crying. No doubt they were upset that they had lost track of Becky and couldn’t bask in the resplendent glow of her loveliness. Then one of them, a spotty-faced boy, glanced up and saw Becky running towards them, legs dashing, tentacled hair thrashing.

Instantly the boy leapt to his feet, his face twisting into a smile. “Becky!”

The heads of all the other kids whipped round in unison, smiles springing into place. As one they all surged towards her.

Anita jumped in front of them, risking being trampled underfoot as she waved the spellbook above her head. “Stop!”

The crowd skidded to a halt, surprise flashing across the faces of everyone present. Becky guessed they hadn’t even noticed Anita until she leapt out in front of them. Several people lost their balance in the abrupt braking and fell skidding across the floor on their bellies – a couple of tiny first formers, a greasy-haired sixth former and Mrs Beckbridge, the plump old music teacher, the glockenspiel she carried splintering on impact, shedding bars like metal toenail clippings.

Anita waved the spellbook at the stunned crowd. “This is how she did it. This is how she made you like her. She cast a spell.”

Bemusement spread throughout Becky’s admirers – brows knitted, lips pursed. One little girl turned from the spellbook to gaze at Becky, her lip and voice quivering in time with each other. “Is this true?”

Becky nodded.

The huge gasp of disappointment was that of a thousand tyres all being let down at once.

Anita smirked at Becky. "Not so popular now, are you?"

Sneering, Anita turned back to the crowd, just in time for them to pounce on her and beat her senseless.

Becky stared in horror. This wasn't what she wanted. Revenge, yes. Humiliation, yes. But no one was supposed to get hurt.

The schoolkids took off their ties and lashed them together into a candy-striped rope. One end was tied to the ceiling, the other left dangling loose.

Anita was dragged over to the rope, her body heaved upwards, a fumbling knot tied about her neck.

Becky stood speechless, wanting to stop this but not knowing how. How could she stop their mad uncontrollable love?

One of the schoolboys glanced back at Becky. But there was no love in his face. Only fear. The maths teacher Mr Hedges had the same look in his face. So did the school band, the football team, the entire school in fact.

It was the same way they used to look at Anita. All the laughter and friendliness would fade and the fear shine through. That was the reason everyone was so nice to Anita, why they echoed her taunts at whichever target she chose. Because they didn't want to become the next target.

But why did they think that about Becky? She had never hurt anybody. Never even insulted anyone, no one would listen to her if she had.

The curse. It was to make Anita as ugly outside as she was inside. When the curse got reflected back on Becky she had been inflicted with Anita's hideousness. That's why everyone was so nice to her, they were afraid of her.

She knew what she had to do.

The spellbook had fallen from Anita's hands when the mob attacked her. Becky scooped it up and flicked to the appropriate chapters. Using the slime oozing from her pores she drew the runes upon the floor. Flicking back through the book she read out the chant. Finally she did the visualization exercise, imagining a great well of happiness.

Shudders ran through her, body parts squelched and popped as they changed shape. Then she was herself again, exactly as she had been before

all this began. Although her school uniform felt a little baggy after having been stretched over her monstrous form.

The mob halted in their lynching to stare at her, the knot about Anita's neck came loose. Anita stirred and gazed blearily about. Becky wondered if she knew what was going on. Probably not. Even if she did she would probably be just as mean to everyone as she always was. Serve her right if they did hang her.

Fear flickered across the crowd and they turned to retie the knot around Anita's neck. Too late Becky realised that Anita was not the only one to have hideous thoughts.

Mighty Spite by Terry Martin

She turned the page
in teenage rage.
How dare they keep her in!
She'd done no wrong
in her young eyes.
Her magic wasn't sin!

Her Auntie May,
who'd come that day
Was such an utter bore
That tolerance was impolite
And called for something more.

So Ellie Rug had waved her wand
And Auntie May had gone
To who knows where
when spells are cast
But it hadn't been for long.

Her ma and pa just hadn't seen
The fun that she'd beheld
As Auntie May then reappeared
And "Fuck!"
was what she'd yelled.

Embarrassed as her Aunt had been
At blurting out a word
That otherwise would not be heard
- The thought was quite absurd -

She'd smiled and let a little wind
Pass out between her cheeks,

Which Ellie Rug
was prone to tell
Her friends for many weeks,
And spread a smell
that bode not well
For all within the room,
And even Ellie couldn't stop
The semblance of a swoon.

But when the odour
had quite gone,
And Auntie May had too,
Her parents shut her in her room
With little more ado.

So now she trawls the pages
Of her great big magic tome
Intent on making life quite bad
For everyone at home.

Razor Voices by Kelly Rose Pflug-Back

“You got skinny,” I remember John saying. “They didn’t feed you enough?”

His blue eyes had been clearer than I’d remembered, his sharp face patched with eczema.

A haze was hanging over the city and the trees behind it. The sun was high up in the sky, and we cast no shadows. I remember watching his eyes wander over my body in a way that men’s eyes rarely do. At first I didn’t recognize it, because it had nothing to do with hate, or sex, or both.

“I figured you would be hungry.” He said, and he looked down at a container he was holding. It made me cry for some absurd reason, the fact that he’d brought me food.

“I missed you.” I answered, because it was easier than telling him what happened; how they gave me food sometimes with piss and broken glass in it, how I just got used to being hungry all the time and after a while stopped noticing, just like when we lived in the squat on Wharf Street and there was never any food.

I wonder now if he’d been able to see how I’d changed, that day—before the words actually came loose from my mouth, before I showed him. I wasn’t the saucer-eyed, speechless thing that used to run from him into the shadows whenever he stayed up all night pacing through downtown, looking for a girl that didn’t exist anymore. And I wasn’t that girl anymore either. I wasn’t the same person I’d been when Danielle was still around and everything was normal. In fact, I wasn’t sure if I was still a person at all, in any practical sense of the word.

Sometimes when I think back, I try to pinpoint the exact time when Danielle started slipping. I don’t know why I do it, other than as a way to think of more avenues to blame myself. When

I really pick away at that last year, it usually comes down to one thing.

Before the drugs, before she started working, there was something else that was eating away at Danielle. I still remember the day she first told me about it, although towards the end it was all she ever talked about. She and I

had been walking to our secret river, the one you have hike down hours of logging roads to get to. The wind had been full of pollen and asphalt fumes, milkweed pods bursting with their silky wool. Time had seemed to be passing too quickly. Just weeks before, the spring had been young and new – the river bank lined with budding crocuses and tender shoots of grass. Not the brambled, overgrown place it was now, thick with insects and wilted from the heat.

“Summer never smells like this, where I used to live,” She’d told me, stopping, looking at me with her red-rimmed eyes.

Her hair was soft tatters of faded, sea-foam green, falling across my face when she bent to kiss my cheek, like she was trying to console me over some bad thing that hadn’t happened yet. Soon she would start dying it a fake yellow-blond, but I didn’t know that at the time. I didn’t know that any of the things that happened would.

The logging road we were on is visible from the ferry when you’re coming to the island; they all are, dusty veins worming through the green quilt of spruce trees that otherwise covers the mountains. You can see the clear cuts too, and they look like the bald patches on a mangy dog. I’d seen them from the ferry the day John came to take me back to the city, and my heart had lurched and hammered against my hollow ribs.

“What’s wrong?” I’d asked her, and she said that she was crying for all the girls who’d disappeared. I knew what she was talking about; I’d known before the papers ever admitted it, just like we’d all known.

Sometimes they would find them tied-up clumsily in shredded tarps and yellow rope, stuffed into the mouths of culvert pipes that leak toxic sludge from the logging sites into the rivers, which carry it eventually to the sea. Sometimes they would find them all cut up, a foot in some residential trash can, its protruding bone mangled by the teeth of a chainsaw. An arm or a leg might wash up on the shore in Esquimalt, or be dragged up in a fisherman’s net. But most of them, they never found. Not even in pieces. Most of the girls, nobody ever looked for. It might have been that the rest of the world didn’t even notice that they were gone.

The mission downtown where Paula works has photos of them all on a big memorial wall; not just the girls, but everybody. The old man who died of exposure three years ago on the steps of the government-run shelter

because they said that all the beds were full and they couldn't let him in. Reggie Elchuk, who the cops shot dead in the park last January because he's not all there and for some reason they thought that made him dangerous enough to shoot.

People think that killers are exceptional individuals, but that's not necessarily true. The shelter workers who locked the door, and the cop who pulled the trigger on Reggie, they're what most people would think of as normal. The people who killed the girls, or hurt them so badly that they wanted to kill themselves, they were normal people too. When something is commonplace enough it becomes ordinary by default, even when that something is killing. The world is full of everyday, ordinary murderers. They're everywhere you look.

That day on the logging roads Danielle told me that the crows who perch, screaming all along the telephone wires downtown are the ghosts of the girls nobody looked for. She said they build their nests way up high, where nobody would think to look. I turned my face to her, and when I looked in her soot-black eyes I realized that the trees around us were filled with the squalling of birds, as though I'd been deaf to the noise before she said it. Their razor voices filled the woods, so loud in my ears that they could almost drown out the hum of far-away chainsaws, the snap and creak of felled timber. The scraping of their voices swirled in her eyes, so dark they looked like they were all pupil. She looked more animal than girl, I thought, her sharp features tensed like she was in pain. When Danielle said things like that, it always seemed like there was no reason they shouldn't be true. The world she saw was more beautiful than reality, and it was full of possibility. My world had no possibilities in it, back then. In my world those girls were just dead, lying in unmarked graves or cheap pine caskets. They were invisible, just like their killers had wanted.

We'd been standing by one of the clear cuts when she said it, and I could see almost forever across the ripped-up wasteland of what used to be the forest. The crows were circling above us, mirrored by their shadows. Black, bird-shaped patches that glided over the uprooted stumps and the hacked off limbs, the parched earth that stretched out to the horizon. I had never seen crows circle before; I thought that only vultures did that. Now sometimes I wonder whether I imagined it.

I wanted to keep looking, but Danielle hooked her arm through mine and kept walking down the dirt road, like there was nothing to see. I remembered cutting peppers on a wooden chopping board once, years before in the kitchenette at Danielle's mom's apartment, and accidentally cutting into the pad of my thumb so deep that the knife grazed my bone. It didn't bleed as much as I'd thought it would, and when I rinsed the blood off under cold water in the sink I could see a cross-section of all the different layers of skin and muscle. The layers went in concentric circles, all the way to the bone. They looked like growth rings, I thought, the ones you see on a sawed down stump that will tell you how old the tree was, if you count them.

Please Danielle, I'd said, although I hadn't said it out loud.

Never let me see you as one of the crows.

In those days it was always just me and Danielle, and usually John too although unlike us he actually had a few other friends. Humans inevitably seem to form some sort of pack when they don't have normal social bonds like families around them, and I guess Danielle and John were my pack. I remember how the alley we used to sit in was roofed in metal grating, and through it I could always see the shapes of circling police helicopters. Ghetto birds, John used to call them, and Danielle would elbow him in the arm and tell him to fuck off, even though she thought it was funny too. That July had been the hottest month of the hottest year, and the city was just a coffin of black asphalt, a jungle with no canopy to shade us.

We'd been so thin and ascetic, always sprawled in the hidden alley or huddled in the alcoves of vacant stores like statues in a grotto. I would nod off into the black muck of opiate dreams and wake up with offerings placed in front of me in my overturned hat, like magic. A few dollars in nickels and pennies, a bent cigarette, sometimes the small miracle of a crumpled bill.

The three of us had never really fit in, even among the other social rejects, although I think it was the worst for Danielle; most people didn't talk to her at all, probably because she seemed crazy to anybody who didn't understand her, which was virtually everybody except me, John, and her mom. I could see it hurting her, the way everybody else's ideas of what was real didn't match up with what she saw and heard and felt. I think in the

end that's why she slipped so much more easily, so much faster than me or John did.

I remember the first time I saw the bruises on her thighs, under her short white schoolgirl kilt. Her body seemed to be getting smaller every day, like the drugs were eating all the softness off her frame. The white skirt and high heels looked so out of place on Danielle, sad and absurd next to her picked-at skin. I missed her old jeans and sweatshirts. I missed not worrying about her. I looked at her face and the thought struck me that maybe I didn't know her as well as I thought I did, or at all. I didn't know anymore if she needed to do this to pay for her growing habit, or whether her habit was growing because it was the only way to cope with working on the Drive.

"Why would you shoot up into your shins?" I'd asked her, when I noticed the dark little circles along the edge of her bone. "Doesn't it hurt there?"

"Exactly," she'd grinned. "I'm trying to stop."

Her eyes had glittered, wet in their dark hollows. She scratched one of the scabs on her shin, sniffing, wiping her skinny wrist across her face. Her watery eyes, her permanent runny nose. It was like Danielle was always crying.

Sometimes at night when I'm trying to sleep I still think about that day, and I find, more often than not, that the pain never really dulled after all. Sometimes I'm just more capable of deluding myself into thinking that it did.

On those nights I usually lie on my back in the dark and stare up at the tiny perforations on the acoustic ceiling tiles in the apartment that John and I have shared for the past couple years now. I start counting them, but the task is always too simple to distract me and I just forget what number I'm on and end up having to start over. It's one of those things you learn, like pacing, like learning to thread your eyebrows with the string from a no-name brand tampon because tweezers are sharp, and you can't have anything sharp. Like meticulously peeling the staples from the spine of some pulpy religious pamphlet, just so you can have something to hurt yourself with, just to watch the blood bead up in the diminutive little scratches and remind you that you're still alive.

Outside, that stuff doesn't work quite as well. The real world is too big and too bright, and it takes a lot more to keep your mind from wandering.

Later that day Danielle and I had gone to her mom's apartment and helped her bake sugar cookies, the three of us spooning powdered milk into endless cups of sweet coffee, listening to the oldies station on the radio and talking about the weather, and places we'd like to travel, and movies that we'd seen. Danielle had put on pants before we went over, but I could still feel the dark tenderness of the bruises on her legs, always cautious not to bump into her, wincing at her soreness as though it were my own. I pressed maraschino cherries from a little jar into the soft, white lumps of cookie dough that Danielle was arranging on the sheets of tin foil. I slid the first sheet into the toaster oven and set the timer.

I thought of the bruises on Danielle's legs and I thought of all the women in the world who have killed people, who have murdered the men that hurt them, who have been swallowed so deep into the darkness that they lash out at the first thing that moves. I thought of them pressing maraschino cherries into soft balls of cookie dough and placing the tinfoil sheets into toaster ovens, knowing all the while that they are killers.

I'm not sure exactly of the last time I ever saw Danielle, and in a way I'm glad that I can't remember. If I was the last one to ever see her alive, I don't want to know. I worried when I didn't see her for a few days, and naturally the thought crossed my mind that something bad could have happened. I went to her mom's house, and she hadn't been there. I went to the drop-in at the mission where they serve free food and coffee every morning, and Paula said that she hadn't seen her either, which was odd, because lately she'd been coming in every morning as soon as the place opened, usually looking like she hadn't slept.

I'd been about to leave when I noticed a guy sitting alone at one of the tables, staring at me. He was wearing a yellow and brown striped toque, and his longish hair was half-knotted into unintentional dreadlocks. He held a cup of coffee in his bony hands, hunched over its warmth. I recognized him from other times I'd gone there to eat, but I couldn't remember his name.

"I saw her about a week ago," He'd said to me, and his words carried across the dull murmur of people talking and laughing, the drone of the

television mounted on the far wall. Paula and I both just stopped and looked at him. When neither of us answered, he kept talking.

It had been a cold night, he'd said, and he was going to go to one of the bank ATM's by the Drive so he could have somewhere warm to sleep. He'd seen her sitting in the bus shelter there, nodding off with her head down, her long yellow hair hanging over her face. A car had stopped for her, and she'd talked to the person inside and then got in. I asked him what the car looked like, what the license plate number was, but he couldn't remember. His bloodshot eyes looked sad.

"I'm sorry," he said, or at least I think that's what he said. I wasn't really listening to anything, anymore.

A couple of days later, some ten year old kid found her body in the harbor. The kid had been flying kites on the docks with his dad when he looked down and saw her bleached-pale hair curling and wavering among the kelp fronds. There was a cement brick lashed to her feet, and a ligature of nylon rope around her red, abraded neck. There were marks all over her, like she'd fought until she couldn't anymore. They'd called the cops, who hadn't even been looking for her despite the increasingly desperate phone calls from me and John and her mom.

After that day, I started seeing monsters everywhere. I dreamed about standing by the side of the highway at night with my thumb held out and a long knife hidden in the sleeve of my sweatshirt, watching the headlights pass me in the dark. I would know somehow when the killer stopped for me. He would lock the car doors after I got in, and I would laugh and laugh.

I would walk alone down the street late at night with the fall wind stinging my face, just laughing to myself like there was nobody listening. The dry leaves danced and spiralled around my feet, like a living thing.

I stopped sleeping, and my eyes sunk into my skull. I went to the funeral in a borrowed black dress, and Danielle's mom cried and cried, her eyes so puffy they were just slits in her weathered face. You guys were all my children she said, throwing her arms around me and John. Don't ever forget that, any time you need anything. Her body was warm and alien to me. I didn't push her away; I think it's the first time I ever didn't push somebody away. The coffin was lowered into its rectangular hole in the

ground, and I thought of the way the frost would creep into her body soon, ice crystals spreading like a pattern of lace over her cheeks, the way they do on window panes sometimes. I was the only one who wasn't crying. Beaks and talons prodded my oesophagus, trying to get past the lump in my throat. I could feel their damp wings struggling in my chest and throat, slick with swallowed mucous. They would find a weak spot, I thought, somewhere they could claw right through me and flap out through the ragged hole, perching on the boughs of fir trees and the shoulders of pallbearers, laughing and laughing and laughing.

The whole thing kind of scared John straight and he started sleeping on the couch at his friend Serge's house, saying he was going to get on welfare and get his own apartment, get away from the streets once and for all. Even though he technically lived there, he would come downtown and walk in circles around all our old hang outs for most of the night, sitting up at the All-Nite drinking dollar coffee with his head in his hands. If I saw him, I ducked down alleys or into thick shadows. He called my name a couple of times, and I didn't answer. I crouched in dark alcoves, holding my breath until he went away.

When I finally found my monster, I wasn't even looking. That's how it works; they hunt, they have to be hunting you, not the other way around. I was walking alone just before dawn, dragging my feet down a back road that leads eventually to the highway. They all do, just like any river will eventually take you to the sea. He was driving a new BMW the color of gunmetal, with windows so tinted that all I saw in them was my own wan reflection when he pulled over and stopped beside me.

"Do you need some help?" He asked me, and he rolled down the passenger's side window. His smile showed teeth that were too straight and too white. He wore a gold watch on one wrist. His clothes looked expensive but ill-fitting, his stomach straining at the buttons of his shirt. A heart attack belly, Danielle's mom would have called it.

I remember getting into the car, the leather seat squeaking underneath me. I remember hearing the click of the doors locking, and my heart flinging itself against my ribs.

I don't really know what to tell you about trying to kill somebody. It's harder than it looks in the movies. Bodies are made to withstand things; the

breastbone doesn't just shatter like sugar-glass or puncture like that polyvinyl plastic that stunt dummies are made of.

I panicked when he tried to touch me, and I hurt him worse than I knew I could. I'd been frozen at first, my eyes clamped shut because I was so used to not having a way to escape, used to just waiting until it was over. Then I remembered what it was I held inside the sleeve of my sweater and the next time I opened my eyes the car smelled like blood and shit, the hole in his belly welling with dark redness as I reached around his heaving, shaking body to unlock the doors. I remember that, and I remember running. I remember curling with my knees to my chest in the cradle of a spruce tree's erosion-exposed roots, asleep in the dirt and the rotten leaves where they found me. Lights and sirens blared from the roadside, flashing through the trees. I wasn't sure how long I'd been there; it could have been days, but the blood on me was still sticky in some places so I figured it hadn't actually been that long at all.

Danielle always told me that you have to die to turn into one of the crows, but at some point after my home became a prison cell I began to doubt that. I pleaded guilty immediately, and then I just stopped opening my mouth altogether. I could feel my heart growing black, spined by the quills of lacquer-dark feathers. It flinched and stuttered in my ribs faster than it should have, like a bird's heart, even though there was nothing to scare or excite me anymore except my own thoughts.

I refused to do the psych assessments they gave me, or answer any of their questions, so they couldn't process me through the classification office and I stayed in segregation, away from the other women. I wouldn't let the doctor touch me either. What if they could tell I had a bird's heart?

Sometimes when they escorted me back and forth from various counseling offices I would see the women who lived on the general population cell blocks, walled off behind big glass panels so the guards could still see them. They looked beautiful and sad to me, sitting at the bolted-down steel tables together, braiding each other's hair or playing cards or writing with pencil stubs on sheets of lined paper. Sometimes they pointed and looked at me, probably wondering what I did to stay in segregation for so long. One of them had peroxide yellow hair that fell in waves past her shoulders, showing three inches of dark brown at the roots.

She had a tattoo on her neck, a word I couldn't read spelled out in looping calligraphy. She reminded me of Danielle, and my eyes filled up and overflowed with tears even though my face stayed slack, still palsied with shock.

I couldn't hear the crows anymore but I could feel them, just outside the prison's thick cement walls. The nodes of their minds were like a net, one that stretched and contracted depending on where they were, although it always stayed connected. My mind was part of the net, always anchored in the same place. I could feel the flutter of all their hearts in time with mine, the mad whirl of them when they lit from the barbed-wire fence tops outside and launched themselves into the sky, drifting on the salt winds.

Weeks passed before I understood what was happening to me, although I think some part of me had known all along. It started with a feeling of tenseness that spread underneath the skin of my arms and shoulders, a feeling like the hairs on the back of your neck standing up when you're outside right before an electrical storm. It was warm in my cell during the day, but it seemed like I always had goosebumps. I remember running my hands over the rows and patterns of small protrusions that covered my skin, hard like pebbles underneath my cotton uniform. They were bigger, more defined than normal goosebumps. I had an ache in my bones that was as bad as anything I'd felt, like my skeleton was changing shape inside me. In my chest I could feel something building, something that at first I thought must be the deep, wracking sobs that I still hadn't let myself cry.

When I finally let the tension bubble up from my throat, I found that it wasn't sobs I'd been holding back at all. Huddled in the far corner of my cell on the narrow metal cot, peals of laughter pushed their way out from between my lips. It was a coarse, croaking laugh that didn't sound like anything made by a human throat. It wracked my whole body until I lay supine on the hard mattress, my arms wrapped around my rib cage as if I could somehow contain it.

I guess it helped that I was still in a maximum security segregation unit at the time. After the first of the feathers pushed their tips from the the skin of my twisted arms, I had to stop denying what was happening. I'd mummy-wrapped myself in the thin sheets that reeked of harsh detergent, the sound of

my own whirring heart and hoarse breathing only broken by the metal clang whenever they opened the slot in my cell door to slide the meal trays in, only to take them away again, uneaten, half an hour later. I knew it was half an hour, because I counted the seconds to distract me from the pain.

Once one of the night watch guards banged on my door while he was making his rounds and asked if I was alright. My new mouth had struggled to force out an answer, but somehow even without lips I'd managed some rough approximation of speech, shaping the sounds in the back of my throat like I assume talking parrots must do.

"Dope sick," I'd grunted, which seemed to be a good enough explanation for him. I had been there for over a month already, but he hadn't seemed to question why my withdrawals had taken so long to set in.

It seemed like weeks that I lay there, too afraid even to move in case part of the blanket were to slip off of me. In reality it was actually only a few days before I felt the cramps of my skeleton changing again, back into its original shape. An itch spread over me as each hollow-shafted quill detached from its follicle, leaving me in a nest of shed black feathers. The pits they'd left in my skin contracted to the size of normal pores again, and when I touched my face it was the feeling of a flesh fingertip meeting a flesh cheek. I tried to gather all the feathers and flush them down the toilet before the next guard made their rounds. They heard the excessive flushing and assumed that I'd smuggled contraband which I was now trying to dispose of, which of course warranted a search and the ransacking of the cell. All they found were the sheets, shredded in places where I'd clutched them in my demented hands, which they filed under my name as a count of misconduct.

I don't really know what to tell you about the rest of the time that I spent there. I drank the cloudy water, ate food that had been spit in. For months I just lay in my cell under the florescent lights that never really turn off, idly running my hands over the hard new plains of my body, traveling to faraway places in my head. I kept my eyes closed and felt the salt wind rushing underneath my wings as I coasted, free. When I slept, I dreamed Danielle was perched at the foot of my bed, a cloak of crow's wings wrapped around her bare shoulders, the long black claws that used to be her

feet carving grooves into the bed's metal frame. She was always telling me something, although on waking I could never remember what.

John came to see me as soon as I was allowed visitors, and I'd cried and asked him not to come again. Seeing him through the thick pane of glass, untouchable, had been harder than not seeing him at all.

Eventually I was deemed fit to enter general population, but the girl who'd reminded me of Danielle was gone by then, released or transferred some other place. For a while I shared a cell with a woman whose ex-husband had covered her in gasoline and set her on fire; her skin was a palimpsest of whorls and knots, still smooth in a few places like tree bark that's been peeled away, exposing the smooth, living wood underneath. Another time I saw an eighteen year old girl bite through her own tongue and spit blood at one of the guards who was trying to drag her to solitary. It would have been an ordinary assault charge, but she had Hepatitis, and her sentence was lengthened by another eight months.

Everybody knew there was something off about me, but the mind will do anything to find a rational explanation, even if that means deceiving itself. Sometimes I would notice some of the really far gone prisoners looking at me, the ones who talked to themselves and took handfuls of colored pills from the nurses every morning. It's always the mad people that I think know the truth – maybe the world of magic only shows itself to them, because it knows nobody will believe them anyway. Or maybe, maybe when you live in the narrowest margin of society, you live in the margins of everything, reality included.

Years have passed now, but still I can feel people's stares following me in a way they never used to. It happens when I walk down the Drive in the early morning, on the way to the job Paula got me at the mission. It happens when I weave my way through the crowded tables in the common room, handing out the soup and bread and overcooked pasta, chatting with some of the regulars before I have to run back to the kitchen again. It happens when John and I sit at the patio of the All-Nite for breakfast with Danielle's mom, drinking the bottomless coffee, still tiptoeing around our shared pain like we might well be doing for the rest of our lives.

Sometimes when I look at her and I see the shadows in her eyes that weren't there before, I think that she can tell what's changed about me too. She can hear the words underneath the clatter of wings that fills the air when the three of us are walking together and the sky fills, inexplicably, with crows. They form a chorus line along the rotting eaves of downtown storefronts, and they stare at us with dozens of pairs of beady black eyes. She knows that they're looking at us, and she looks back.

Even when we're talking and laughing together, part of me is almost on edge around her. Part of me is always waiting for her to lean close to me and whisper, I know your secret, quiet so that nobody else can hear.

I know that you're the reason the Drive is a different place now, she'll tell me, and she'll look at me with her eyes full of those roiling black shadows.

You're the reason the cops don't come there anymore, and neither do the news cameras.

You're the twisted shadow that some people see perched on the mission's peaked roof at night, although nobody ever believes them.

You're the reason it's not girls who are disappearing anymore.

And then I'll feel my heart beat out of time with itself as the crows all descend, their scraping laughter echoing through the city, and John will absently lace his fingers through mine and squeeze my hand, like he always does when he's nervous. And then something will happen, although to this day I'm not sure what I think that something might be.

Maybe it'll be nothing. Maybe our mouths will fall open, and the three of us will laugh.

Botched by Lorraine Slater

Miranda had her father's nose. It looked as if a blob of clay had been hurled at her face and splat! There it remained, a big knobbly conk hogging her other features, the fine feminine bones, the carefully pencilled brows, the lips that might have been kissable were it not for that hooter.

In her car at the lights, she'd sense them staring at her profile, laughing most probably. Sometimes she pictured herself as a coin head, distant and aloof, perhaps a Roman empress surrounded by peasants, but on the inside she was crumpling with anxiety because that nose wasn't Roman, it was a loathsome lump. On red, stop, it was the worst, a deformed parsnip squatting on her face. Amber, it began to shrink. Foot down on green and she was speeding away, her nose receding to its regular ugliness.

When she discovered her husband's affair with the button-nosed bitch from the health club, she could have snipped her own snout off with a rusty pair of shears. But there was no need for that. Guilt-stricken and ashamed, Gordon was keen to throw money at each and every problem, starting with the biggest.

Rhinoplasty corrected Miranda's defect, boosted her confidence and gave her a new lease of life. Because everyone knows going under the knife alters more than the physical. It affects your self-esteem, and a nip here, a tuck there improves a person's entire outlook.

For a while.

So much pressure these days to be eternally young and beautiful, especially for women. But all Miranda wanted was to fit in, to have a normal nose and not be the freak with the beak.

Her breasts had always been on the small side, B cup, and her back was broad so they were basically a couple of fried eggs. She wanted implants to take her up to a D cup then at the

last minute figured, since she was going to be slit open, she may as well go for E. It was important they looked natural, of course, but E or EE would give her an extra oomph.

So much pressure these days for women to be sexy and desirable, and even small boobs were subject to gravity. And as for the toll of

breastfeeding three greedy children, well, it didn't bear thinking about, did it? After such a thankless sacrifice she deserved a reward. Yes, at the ripe old age of 42 (life begins at 40, she was late, tick tock), Miranda wanted her breasts back, perky, cute, and fractionally bigger than God intended.

And it was only a boob job. She wasn't about to head down the route of designer vaginas and whatnot. Besides, breast augmentation was one of the most common procedures, and less drastic than a nose job. She'd had no complaints arising from her initial surgery at Emergence (the low-cost clinic with a lifetime's aftercare). And if she could cope with post-rhinoplasty pain, the black eyes, bandaged face and weeks of sleeping in a recliner, she could cope with the discomfort following breast surgery.

The result thrilled her (although discomfort wasn't what she'd have called it). She felt more womanly, more vibrant, more in command of her own body. Without a doubt, these puppies belonged to her again, not to the legacy of her babies' gums. Should have taken the plunge years ago! Gordon was a fan too. "A proper handful," he said once the wounds had fully healed. "Slightly harder than normal tits," he'd added, making Miranda feel she was a piece of meat being measured against the button-nosed bitch and all the others in his history and his secrets. She could practically see the discarded bras littering the floor of Gordon's brain.

But no, that was silly, and on the whole she was happy. Only sometimes when she looked at herself in the mirror, did Miranda's enhancement appear odd. The nipples were a pair of wide eyes staring back at her, and the two domes of flesh seemed startled to be there.

So much pressure these days to be perfect, but nobody's body is perfect, is it? Even surgery can't provide that.

The problem was probably that the rest of her was aging at its regular rate. The years went by so fast, oh hell, death's gaining on us all, but you could slow the hands of time with chemical peels and Botox. None of us are getting any younger, if only we were. We're like damselflies, aren't we? Here for such a short time. What a waste not to make the most of it, not to cherish and nurture our individual beauty, not to bring it to the fore like those evanescent insects with their gossamer wings darting gaily above ponds in a sunlit haze, electric blue shards and fluttering iridescence.

Who wouldn't want some of that?

These non-surgical methods, however, were only temporary, that was the drawback. So after dabbling with dermatologists for a couple of years, Miranda returned to Emergence and the surgeons she trusted. They felt like old friends. Consultancy was never rushed, they really listened to her, seemed genuinely to care, wanted her to emerge like a butterfly from the cramped chrysalis of age.

Last year's collagen lips, she conceded, were a touch too much and her face hadn't settled since the last round of Botox. Could it be nerve damage? That stuff's pretty toxic. Well, she hoped it wasn't lasting and till then, what the hell, she'd glide serene and expressionless among those who thought she cared. Truth to tell, she wasn't overly pleased with the eyebrow tattoos either. Too dark and arched. They needed correcting. Her friend, Carol, however, thought she looked glamorous, so very Beverly Hills, and openly admitted she was envious of the work. "It's like having a fur coat on your face!" She said. "A sign you've got money to burn, and doesn't that prove how much Gordon must love you?"

Soon, Miranda could see where Carol was coming from, especially after the endoscopic midface lift and jowl surgery, two procedures which took years off her. She grew to like the artificiality of her appearance, rather admired the hint of doll in the mirror. Her rejuvenated image made her feel distant and aloof, even from herself. She was invulnerable, untouchable, ageless, plastic. No one stared at her at traffic lights anymore although some did a double take when she passed them in the street. Probably thought she was famous.

She looked good, felt great, and would feel better still with a brow lift because yes, after the cheek lift, her face needed tweaking for, what was that phrase again? Aesthetic balance. She had the forehead of an angry person. Her mouth was miserable too. Marionette lines they were called, those grooves that ran from the corners of a downturned mouth. Fillers would help temporarily but surgery was preferable, and the scar virtually undetectable. It wasn't enough to be happy. You needed to look happy or no one would know you were fine.

So much pressure these days to keep on top of things. Small wonder everyone was after a surgical quick-fix.

With liposuction you could achieve in hours what would take years in the gym and those creams never worked and if it was difficult, Gordon could

pay in instalments.

Miranda opted to get rid of her saddlebag thighs, to have those unwanted deposits sucked out through a tube, but she died under anaesthetic. A pulmonary embolism from the looks of it. Her fault. She wasn't wearing compression stockings. Should have known better by this stage. And the staff at Emergence didn't have time to go round checking everyone was kitted out correctly, in sound medical health, not popping too many pills. They had enough on their plates as it was. Hell's bells, business was booming and so many patients wanted to talk; my divorce, my life, my sorrow, my dreams.

But it was OK, he got her back.

Rejuvenate.

Reanimate.

Miranda left the clinic with one thigh bigger than the other, limping down the shrub-lined drive. She moaned in pain, a bloodied, fat-stained bandage unravelling below her skirt. Her face was dazed with death, lips so bloated they appeared to be melting. Her blank eyes were lost in a mask of features whose angles were skew-whiff, whose skin was polished and stretched, flushed like a burns victim's and flecked with scars. She didn't look too different.

So much pressure these days to keep them alive.

Monster Girl by Andrew Hook

That morning, there was an Escher of birds in the sky.

Looking askance it was hard to tell where one ended and another began. They dipped and soared, like a thin piece of fabric caught on the breeze: one object interlinked by individual cells. Yoshi noticed them as he left the train at Yūrakuchō Station. The commuters around him stared ahead, focussed on their destinations, their work. But Yoshi saw the birds, and whilst they were of one colour the black and white tessellates of Escher's print came to mind. Opposites reflected. The same. But not the same.

With a flick of his imagination they were gone.

His satchel slung over his shoulder, he wandered over to the Yūrakuchō Center Building. When he started university his parents had ensured his financial security. He didn't need the host club job, they would have reasoned. And he reasoned that he didn't need to tell them. But the job paid for the Krusty Kreme donuts that he bought from the outlet within the center. They were his only extravagance, his remaining earnings were stored in his second savings account: the fund that would engage him a love doll.

He pushed through the floor to ceiling glass doors of the bakery, selected a winter-iced heart-shaped donut, and watched the impassive face of the girl behind the counter as it was boxed. When she passed him the container she smiled. An illusion broken.

Yoshi returned to the train station, headed for the University of Tokyo. He ate the donut in the grounds: the sickly, over-sugared taste oozing into his stomach, lining it for the remainder of the day. Plastic Beach played in his earphones. The other students walked on by, in pairs or groups. If they saw Yoshi, it didn't register. He was an outsider here, kept himself to himself. He didn't like attention for attention's sake.

Yoshi was the only student at the host club. The others had dedicated this slice of their lives to their work, as though they might do it in perpetuity. In practice, of course, hosts were usually 'retired' by their late twenties. His persona altered as soon as he slipped into the manned door at the back.

In the dressing room he gelled his hair, chatted amiably with the other hosts. A side bet ran around the room as to who would be chosen first. Yet Yoshi knew who would choose him and when. Ayako would arrive later than some, perhaps after one, maybe two in the morning. A keep bottle was already reserved for him. He liked Ayako, but the nature of the job meant their relationship was preserved solely within dark corners and neon lights. No drama. It was exactly the way Yoshi wanted it. He liked her enough to tolerate her, little more.

Mid-way through the evening, smart suited and smiling, he joined Shoichi's table. As usual, it was noisy. Yoshi didn't recognise the girl Shoichi was with but she was so drunk she had fallen over. Shoichi reached under her arms, pulled her back onto the leather seat. He pressed the champagne bottle into her hand and she necked it back, white frothing each corner of her mouth like an incoming tide. Yet like the Escher birds, the champagne flowed in one direction whilst giving the impression of the other direction.

It was then that Ayako tapped him on the shoulder.

He would encourage her to buy drinks whilst she talked about her work, her colleagues, what dresses she had seen and were intending to buy, what her husband did for her and what he didn't do for her. This latter part of the conversation edging out slowly - like a spy sneaking a peak at a mark around the corner of a building - only towards the end of the evening. Yoshi nodded. Agreed with everything she said. Listened.

That was what he was good at, listening.

Ayako was good at talking. But then she also wasn't good enough at talking for Yoshi, because, truth be told, she talked too much.

Dawn hit the sky, as swift as a magician pulling a tablecloth out from under a table, retaining everything as it was without the dark background. Shoichi thumped Yoshi hard on the back, a friendly gesture. He ran off, clutching his earnings, his winnings. Yoshi slipped his own payment deep into his trouser pocket. It was Saturday morning. After returning to his apartment and finding time to sleep, he woke and took a train to Saitama Prefecture's Nishi Kawaguchi district.

There wasn't the commuter press at the weekend. The train blurred the landscape outside, but within the occupants were effectively static. Yoshi fixed his eye on a girl who sat at the far end, diagonally from himself.

Her face dipped downwards, immersed in a book. From time to time her eyelashes flickered. The remainder of the blink unseen. When she turned pages, her fingers appeared delicate, as though they too were made of paper. Shoulder-length hair completed her facial ensemble. Yet when she stood to exit Yoshi knew that she would disappoint. As she left he tried to catch the name of the author she had been reading. But too late her feet hit the platform and she was off. Released into reality.

Yoshi had cultivated a business relationship with a gentleman by the name of Takashi who he had contacted through an advert in the back of Aidroid magazine. When the train came to his stop he stood, disembarked in the same manner as the girl had left the train, turned to his right, and walked the mile to Takashi's workshop.

Takashi had promised him the usual standard for less. Yoshi's love doll should cost him no more than 500,000 Yen. Following confirmation of his satisfaction the doll would be shipped discretely to his apartment. His specifications would be adhered to. 100% silicone, height: 155cm, weight: 27kg, bust: 90 cm with a 65 cm underbust, waist: 58 cm, hips: 80cm, shoe size 23cm. Yoshi had been very precise when they first met. Takashi had been impressed.

"You know what you want, young sir."

Yoshi had shrugged.

"Yet," and here Takashi paused, "are you totally sure about the nipples, the vagina?"

Yoshi placed a finger on his own lips. His silence spoke more than words. Takashi nodded. No doubt the boy had his reasons.

Almost four months later, Yoshi saw his hand reach out, depress Takashi's door bell. His heart pounding. First date.

"You are quiet tonight Yoshi."

He snapped from his reverie, like a fish breaking free from a taut line.

"Sorry, Ayako." His smile returned, shored up with bamboo scaffolding. In truth, he was back at his apartment, superimposing his doll over Ayako's features, making the comparison, confirming the choice.

He had named her Mimette. Right now; exactly now; she was sitting cross-legged on a purple bean bag in white leggings and a thin cream blouse, slightly bunched around the neckline, a taffeta-effect, watching television.

He had placed the volume on low. Her eyes would be open, drinking in the adverts, the game shows. But she wouldn't actually be watching anything. She would simply be waiting. Waiting for Yoshi's return.

Here, at the host club, Ayako was animated. She had had too much to drink. A champagne tower, using six bottles, had recently collapsed. Yoshi had watched in slow motion as the alcohol poured and puddled on the floor. The cost of two Mimette's. It was nothing to Ayako. But he wasn't attracted to her because of the money. He wasn't attracted to her.

Her eyebrows were off-kilter, one marginally higher than the other. Her mouth, usually soft and tender, could sometimes draw a hard line when the dawn flecked the horizon and she realised she had stayed longer than intended. Whilst Ayako was only ever angry with herself, Mimette was angry with no one.

This is what Yoshi was thinking as Ayako chided him for drifting away from her.

At the bar, the owner caught Yoshi's eye. It was enough. Yoshi smiled. Made a remark. Ayako laughed. Stability restored. But it was tenuous, that stability, so easily cracked in reality.

It had been a Wednesday night. Yoshi had barely slept four hours before he was riding the Yamamonte line, heading towards the university. Mimette had lain beside him as he slept. Not touching. Her back facing his back, her face to the wall. Clothed.

Yoshi's parents had quizzed him about his studies, as they did at least once a month. Truth was, he was slipping. Now he had Mimette the opening possibilities of a degree and entrance to business didn't entice. He told his parents enough to make them proud of him. He still withheld information about the host club. Maybe he wouldn't remain there. It ate too much of his time and he no longer needed the money.

On a bench he ate a Krusty Kreme donut purchased the day before. His fridge temperature had hardened the icing, stiffened the dough. He broke it into two pieces. Crumbs drew the attention of pigeons. One speckled black, the other speckled white. Or maybe the opposite. Yoshi looked at the crumbs in his hand. Threw them out.

There was a depression on the surface of the bench. When he turned, he saw Minori for the first time. Before he knew it, he held out the second half of the Krusty Kreme donut.

Before she knew it, she took it. Icing creamed her fingers, glazed them. Yoshi looked at those fingers. They were as smooth as silicone.

Yet Minori didn't eat the donut. She pulled it to pieces and the two pigeons were joined by others. In moments, all that were left were sticky beaks. Minori licked her fingers, took out a tissue from her bag, then held out her hand.

"Minori."

Yoshi looked at her fingers. Touched her hand briefly.

"Yoshi."

*

Friday night he telephoned the host club. For an hour beforehand he ate salted peanuts. His voice was dry, hoarse. The management understood. Would he be available for work tomorrow? He might. He could feel the nod at the end of the line. He wasn't sure whether he would go tomorrow. He wasn't sure if he would call again.

Beside him on the kitchen table was a steaming bowl of miso soup. He swallowed slowly, regained his voice.

The television was on in the living quarters. Yoshi wiped the corners of his mouth with a handkerchief then popped a mint. When he entered the living area, Mimette had her back to him, her eyes open to an advert for new technology. He sat beside her, but she didn't notice.

This close, he could smell her perfume. Her skin waited for his imprint. She was dressed in a smart blouse, long skirt. Dressed a little older than her years. Yoshi reached out, cupped her right breast. It was a smooth ball. No nipple. Beneath the skirt, under the white panties, she was equally smooth. Other than her delicate ears and slightly parted mouth she was holeless. A love doll, not a sex doll. Sometimes Yoshi slept with an arm around her. She moulded against his moving form.

There was a dichotomy between Mimette and Ayako and Minori. Mimette asked for nothing from him, gave everything. Ayako gave everything, asked for nothing. Minori gave nothing, asked for nothing. They had shared more donuts, and eaten none. The birds were finding it harder to fly.

Yoshi turned off the television, hooked his arm under Mimette and took her to bed.

At 4am someone knocked hard on his door.

Yoshi sat up, rubbed his eyes. Mimette was facing the wall. The sheet had slipped from her body, and her smooth rear reflected the moonlight. Again, the knocking; insistent. Yoshi rose, pulled on his boxers, dressing gown. Made his way to the door.

The fisheye revealed Shoichi. Of course, he was drunk. There was a girl under his arm. When Yoshi looked closer, rubbed the fisheye and looked again, he saw it was Ayako. Her eyes were half-closed. She was slumped against Shoichi. He wondered if she were awake.

Shoichi thumped the door so hard that the wood vibrated the tip of Yoshi's nose. Seeing a light come on under his neighbour's door, he slipped the lock, stood back as both of them fell in Shoichi lay Ayako on the floor. She might be dead. Dead drunk.

"She came for you," he said, as though it explained everything. Then he saw Yoshi's glance to the half-opened bedroom door. "Ah," he said. "We should leave."

Yoshi almost said, it isn't what you think. Then decided the alternative was the worse of two evils. Instead he said, "She can't stay here."

"Tell that to her," Shoichi said. "She was crying. Haven't you seen your messages?"

Yoshi glanced over to his house phone, where a green light flashed on and off, a demented stop/go sign. The club had been persistent.

Too far, he heard Shoichi say. Too far.

Then Shoichi was pouring himself a glass of water in the kitchen. The sound was so clear, the cup so low beneath the tap, that Yoshi first thought he was peeing.

"You shouldn't have brought her here," he said. "What about her husband?"

Shoichi laughed. "You are her husband," he said. "We are all husbands in the host bar. All perfect. All listen. What does she want with a husband when she has you?"

Yoshi placed his head in his hands. Shoichi slapped his back.

"I'll give her this water. Get her out. Your secret is safe with me."

But it wasn't. Because when they looked to the doorway Ayako was gone, and almost in that same instant there was a keening, a wail of sorrow,

and then a moment where self-pity turned to anger, and Ayako's voice could be heard shouting monster, monster. Over and over again.

Yoshi suspected it was more a fear of rejection than of what she had seen which had caused Ayako's reaction. Fear of the known, rather than the unknown. This was what women were afraid of nowadays, had always been afraid of. Shoichi bundled her out of the flat, a grin on his face. It wasn't clear why. Fifty-fifty. But even so, Yoshi knew he wouldn't be welcome at the host club again. He would have to focus on his studies if he wanted to make money.

Mimette wasn't damaged, but her limbs were twisted unnaturally. Yoshi turned on the bedroom light, returned them to a more positive shape. He dressed her, seated her on a stool in the kitchen, then returned to his bed. Wondered if he would dream of Minori.

He did. She was on the university bench with a hand outstretched towards the pigeons. What he thought were crumbs speckling her palm turned out on closer glance to be tears in the silicone from a dozen pigeon pecks. He ran a thumb over Minori's left eye and it failed to close. He ran a quick glance over her blouse, believed he saw the nub of something pressed against the fabric. Then he awoke.

It was somehow still dark. Yoshi wandered back into the kitchen. His mouth had never recovered from the peanuts. On Mimette's left cheek a black shape discoloured her face. Turning on the light, he saw the slug, no more than a few millimetres, antenna extended, as though an alien being receiving signals from outer space.

By the time Yoshi plucked up courage to invite Minori to his apartment, Mimette had already moved on.

Monster by Nicole Papaioannou

You swaddled me
in the softest blankets you could find,
like you were trying to protect me
from a dangerous monster
hiding under the bed.

But I am twenty years old,
and I do not believe in monsters
under the bed anymore.

Yet, you held me tightly
in the grip of your muscled arms
as if to keep something
from coiling up and stealing me
from my place beneath the covers,
though I told you,
“I am not a little girl,
and I do not believe
there is anything to fear
in the dark.”

As we lay, your chin to my forehead,
From the hollow of your
chest,
I could hear your heart
shaken into a frenzy each time
I wiggled from my spot.

With glowing eyes and a terrible smile,
I was suddenly aware of the monster.

Lunging forward, I broke free of your grasp
and seized your breath
with a firm lock of lips.

I held you captive
with a tightening grip
and rising body heat,
with twists of hips
and raking of fingertips
on shivering skin.
You had no chance.

There was only flesh left in the morning.
And me, quivering under the blanket.
I could only peer up
into your eyes,
now all pupil.

My New Pony by Derek John

“Poor Sooty!”

Little Stephanie buried her face in the glossy black mane of the dying pony, feeling its last struggling breaths rise and fall beneath her. The pony uttered a feeble moan as another quiver of pain rippled through its broken body and Stephanie began to wail piteously. Scalding tears spilled from her red-rimmed eyes.

“Poor old Sooty!”

“I’m sorry young lady,” said the vet, his face wrinkled into the deep, dark, frown that grown-ups make when they have bad news to tell. “There’s nothing more we can do. When a pony gets a dose of colic this serious, there’s only one humane option left and that’s to put him out of his misery.”

Stephanie’s mother reached over and touched her gently on the shoulder, beckoning her to leave the stable while the vet filled his syringe with the grim poison.

“Will it hurt him mummy?” Stephanie whimpered, as they stood outside in the cold.

“No sweetie, it will be just like falling asleep for poor old Sooty, he won’t feel a thing.”

Her mother re-joined the vet and Stephanie heard them talking in hushed tones behind the stable door.

“What on earth could have caused it?” Her mother muttered anxiously, “Sooty came from the finest bloodstock and Stephanie’s father paid no small amount of money for him. She was due to ride him in the village show this Easter. The poor child will be devastated.”

“Well,” said the vet, “Does little Stephanie do all the feeding and mucking-out?”

“Of course,” said her mother, “She lives for her pony. It’s her pride and joy. You know, she has never really settled-in since we moved to Selsingham and doesn’t mix much with the children at the local school. That’s why she spends almost all her spare time down here with Sooty; you could say he was her best friend.”

“I don’t want to lay any blame”, the vet replied in a low voice, “but it seems that some Common Ragwort has become mixed-in with the fodder. This is a deadly poison for horses.”

This remark cut little Stephanie to the bone. Nobody cared more for the pony than her; nobody in the whole wide world. Every evening, as dinner was cooking, she would be down at the stable, turning-out the pony’s bedding, grooming him, checking his hooves and fixing his fodder. Come rain or shine she would always be there. She had loved that horse as if it was her own flesh and blood.

She beat against her mother’s chest in fury as the two grown-ups emerged from behind the door.

“That’s not true! That’s not true!” She shouted through an agony of tears, “The hay comes directly from Farmer Tom. And all his fields are lovely grassy meadows! I check each bale for Ragwort before I give it to her. It can’t possibly be! It’s a lie!”

But then she caught sight of the lifeless body which now lay still and peaceful under an old tartan blanket.

Stephanie had stayed up all night comforting poor Sooty, rubbing balms into his heaving sides, trying to sooth the colic. He was still warm and she lay against his silky flanks, feeling the dying heat radiate into her. Only yesterday, he had snaffled crab-apples greedily from her hand until she scolded him for being a fat little pony. She gently stroked his muzzle, choking off her sobs in the matted darkness of his mane.

All around the sides of his stall were pinned the rosettes they had won together at the gymkhana: a fluttering display of first and second places. Their main competitor in the village ponyclub shows had been Viscount, the snow-white gelding owned by Jemima Aiscue, and their rivalry was as bitter and competitive as only young girls can be.

Many tearful evenings had been spent pinning the silver rosettes to the stall after some minor mishap had gifted Jemima victory, but then again, nothing was so sweet as the victorious revenge when Stephanie would glimpse a second-placed Jemima throwing tantrums in the rear of her mother’s Land-Rover.

Now that they had both graduated into the mini-jumps section, the competition had reached a new level of intensity. Sooty was a natural showjumper and sailed over the fences with such unruffled ease it was

almost as if he had invisible wings attached. Jemima Aiscue and Viscount were dull and clumsy by comparison; they didn't have a chance against Stephanie and Sooty in the village ponyclub show this Easter and they knew it.

After a while, her mother led her silently out of the stables and some strange men arrived with a trailer to take Sooty away. Stephanie could not bear the sight of her beloved pony being dragged like a piece of meat up the ramp and ran sobbing into the house and up the stairs to her room.

Stephanie's bedroom walls were plastered with calendars, cut-outs and posters of her favourite horses. She ripped them down in angry handfuls and sat weeping bitter tears of sorrow and regret amongst the heaps of tattered paper.

At school the next day, the news of Sooty's death had spread all across the playground. Jemima was lording it with her clique of girlfriends and was perfectly hateful and teased Stephanie most dreadfully.

"Imagine not checking her pony's fodder! Why that's the first thing I do every day! No showjumping rosettes for you this year: Stephanie-Wephania the big fat Blephanie!

Stephanie stuck her fingers in her ears and ran away. No way was she going to cry in front of the bullies. The pain and loss at Sooty's death had given way to a dull resentment and a deadly suspicion: it was Jemima Aiscue who had put the ragwort into Sooty's feed as surely as if her fingerprints were all over the stable.

Stephanie recalled how, at the inter-school competition just one week earlier, her saddle had broken at the final fence sending her tumbling to the ground where she had landed with a frightful bump! And she had been on course for a clear round as well, way ahead of Jemima's three faults.

Afterwards, once the lady from the St John's Ambulance had patched her up, she had investigated the broken strap of the saddle which looked as if it had been deliberately weakened by a cut from a blade. She knew that Jemima always carried a Swiss army knife with her, complete with the device for taking stones out of horses' hooves. And she had smiled so sweetly at Stephanie as she flicked it open, scraping the quick of her pony's hoof, as blatantly as you like, right in front of her.

The month of the show was fast approaching and every Saturday as she went to buy her copy of Pony World magazine at the village shop,

Stephanie would see Jemima and Viscount practicing on the jumps her father had set up in the field behind their house. Jemima's father was a lawyer in the City and drove a huge growling Jaguar that had always upset Sooty as it roared past down the lane past his paddock. Stephanie ground her fingers into her palms in silent fury at the injustice of it all.

One fateful Saturday, Stephanie decided to take the long way home just to avoid the sight of them. On the edge of Selsingham was a ramshackle farmstead owned by the Cromwells, an old eccentric couple who ran a donkey sanctuary where retired seafront rides lived out their final years in the peace of the Cambridgeshire countryside.

Stephanie noticed a jet black pony galloping energetically around the field, weaving in and out amongst the dodderly old donkeys. She picked a crab-apple from the verge and offered it over the fence where the pony came trotting over to her. It was scruffy and badly in need of grooming, but there was a glint of fire in its eye which instantly captivated her.

"Good boy!" She said as it nibbled the apple. She picked some burrs out of its straggly mane. "You poor thing, a good wash and brush-up and you'd be gleaming! Just like poor old Sooty."

Suddenly, someone behind her grabbed her by the wrist, forcing her to drop the apple to the floor. Stephanie gasped in shock and turned around. It was Mrs Tompkins the village busybody.

"Don't be feeding that mongrel any of our apples!" She lectured. "Don't you know that's old Mother Dale's pony? It's a pity they didn't send him straight off to the knackers when they had the chance! Now be off with you!"

Stephanie ran off, but the following day she sneaked back with some more treats for the pony. She asked at school about old Mother Dale, but the children in her class all mumbled and made silly excuses as if some shameful secret was burdening the whole village. Eventually, one of the girls had taken her behind the bike sheds where after several solemn blood-oaths and "Hope-to-dies" she had told Stephanie the whole story in a frightened whisper.

The gypsy camp had been by the hill on the common outside Selsingham and old Mother Dale was an ancient gypsy-woman, some said she was over a hundred years old. The gypsies came often into the village selling clothes-pegs and lucky heather, fixing pans and sharpening knives,

but in the winter they travelled abroad and only Old Mother Dale remained. She lived in a brightly painted caravan drawn by a jet-black pony called Pyewackett and took in washing and did small chores for the village womenfolk in order to make ends meet.

But one fateful day, Old Mother Dale had a falling-out with the wife of Farmer Tom. She had been falsely accused by her of stealing eggs from the hen-coop and brought up before the local magistrates and fined. On the court steps she had cursed the family with the most frightful oaths and maledictions. Soon after, Farmer Tom's cattle sickened and died and his wife's butter soured in the churn. Such misfortunes befell them that eventually the whole village came to believe in old Mother Dale's curse.

Farmer Tom's wife collapsed in the street and soon was at death's door. The doctor said it was cancer but the villagers knew better - it was witchcraft and since time immemorial there had been only one sure remedy for dealing with a witch.

The unfortunate Farmer's wife died roaring for a priest and that very night the men from the village went with shotguns and torches to exact judgement on old Mother Dale.

And so the caravan burned brightly with her still inside screaming like a banshee. Where were the forces of law and order, the village policeman and the local JP, you may ask? Why, they were there in the midst of them egging them on!

Pyewackett screeched in fear at the flames and breaking loose from his tether ran amok amongst the men. Jemima's father raised his shotgun and took aim right between its wild and fiery eyes. But Farmer Tom had reached out and pulled the gun away.

"No, let the poor dumb animal be" he said, "A beast can't choose their master."

And the strangest thing was, that when they went to look thought the wreckage the following day, not a trace of old Mother Dale could they find, not a bone.

The pony ran wild about the village and became a general nuisance, before being taken in by the donkey sanctuary where he had spent the last few years as its wildest and most untameable inmate. Stephanie began to visit the sanctuary each day on the way back from school and the pony would come trotting up to the fence to meet her as if they were already old friends.

Often he would be there waiting for her as if he magically knew when she was coming.

A plan began to form in Stephanie's mind. She would have a new pony and school him over jumps in time for the show even if she fell off a hundred times.

"Oh daddy!" She pleaded incessantly that evening, "Buy Mother Dale's pony for me - please!"

Eventually, her father relented and paid a token amount to the Cromwells for him. The donkey sanctuary was glad to be rid of the wild and disruptive pony and back in the stables Stephanie spent all day cutting his mane and shampooing and grooming the matted hair.

"Pyewackett! What an awful name!" She said, "You're so dark and mysterious I shall call you Shadow." The pony whinnied as if in agreement with this impromptu christening.

Stephanie's mother had arranged for Shadow to have a check-up by the vet the next day. After giving Shadow a thorough examination the vet stood back and scratched his head as if perplexed by something.

"Shadow's in fine fettle young lady," he said, "but I'm worried about his teeth, they look very odd. See here?" He pulled back Shadow's lips.

"Look at the upper and lower jaws. The front teeth are very long and very sharp - almost like canines. Though of course, you remember from school that all horses are ruminants and only eat vegetation. I'll file them down in case they start to give him trouble."

The vet pulled out a huge rusty file that looked like a reject from a school woodwork class and tried to open Shadow's mouth, but he frisked and jumped so much that he soon gave up.

"Well, he is a lively one!" He grinned, "I'll give him a knockout shot next time and we'll do it then."

Shadow nudged and nuzzled her impatiently as if to goad her into saddling him up for his first round of jump practice. Stephanie led him out into the field where she had assembled a course of makeshift jumps from old tyres and broom handles. Clear round followed clear round. Shadow barely needed to be guided at all as he cleared each fence with the graceful agility of a thoroughbred.

News travels fast in a small village and in school on Monday Jemima and her friends were grinning ear-to-ear and mocked Stephanie without

mercy.

“Ha ha! Poor Stephanie! You’re family’s so poor you have to ride a Gypsy pony in the show! Thank’ee kindly sor!” They tugged their forelocks and threw clothes-pegs at her.

Despite Jemima’s incessant mocking, Shadow was proving to be an outstanding jumper, easily a match for Sooty and leagues ahead of clumsy old Viscount - and Jemima knew it.

Stephanie spent every moment of free time she had with Shadow. One lunchtime, she was wolfing down a bacon sandwich when Shadow sniffed the air and nudged her hand as if to ask for a treat.

She it held it out to him and he took the sandwich between his lips, then dropped it to the floor and nibbled out the bacon, giving bright whinnies of pleasure. From that moment onwards, Shadow developed a real love for thick crunchy pieces of fried bacon and Stephanie would sneak him occasional treats from her father’s morning fry-up: sausages, black pudding, rashers - all gobbled down ravenously.

“I’ll give you a real treat Shadow!” She said one day after raiding the freezer, “I’m going to fry you a steak!” Stephanie unwrapped the raw dripping piece of meat to show him, but before she knew it Shadow had snaffled it from her grasp and was wolfing it down greedily. Her mother eventually became suspicious at the continual disappearance of the Sunday joint and so Stephanie’s pocket money was spent instead on trips to the butchers for special treats that Shadow would consume with delight – red-raw and bleeding.

On Saturday, after giving Shadow a good rubdown and feed, Stephanie had made her weekly trip to the village shop to buy sweets and her magazine. Jemima and Viscount were practising jumping over cavalettis in the vast manicured front lawn of her parent’s house. Stephanie crouched low behind the garden wall and watched her rival make mistake after mistake. They were hopeless. Jemima was constantly misjudging Viscount’s stride and time after time she sent the bars clanking to the ground. On the final jump her pony refused and Jemima tumbled ungraciously onto the grass. Stephanie popped up from her hiding place, and waved at the dishevelled Jemima who was trying to rub the grass stains from her designer jodphurs.

“See you at the show Jemima!” She shouted, and with not a little hint of superiority in her voice. Jemima said nothing but looked daggers at her across the grass as she grabbed Viscount by the bridle and led him away.

Mocking Jemima was a big mistake. As Stephanie was walking home from school on Monday they were waiting for her: Jemima Aiscue, and her two playground acolytes Candida Sheridan and Olivia Royal.

Jemima stood arrogantly in front of her and blocked her each time she tried to pass.

“Where do you think you’re going, Stephanie – Blephanie! This is our road and we charge people who want to walk on it.”

“That’ll be five pounds please,” said Olivia holding out her hand.

“But I have no money!” Stephanie cried.

“No money!” Sneered Jemima, “Come on! I’ll buy some clothes-pegs from you!” And she flung a stinging handful of pennies into her face.

“No money? Then you’ll have to pay the penalty fare!” Said Candida, whose father was the local JP, “And the penalty fare is a good thrashing!”

They pummelled Stephanie mercilessly, pulled her hair and pushed her into the ditch where she lay sobbing and covered in mud. Jemima stood looking down at the pathetic figure with a nasty smirk of contempt on her face.

“Yes, it was a real pity about poor old Sooty,” she said archly, “It would be terrible if anything should happen to Shadow, wouldn’t it girls?” Olivia and Candida nodded and started tossing clumps of reeking Ragwort at the cowering figure.

Stephanie huddled in the ditch until she was sure her tormentors had gone then she ran home and went straight to Shadow’s stable to have a good cry. He seemed distressed by her dishevelled appearance and stamped his hooves in anger.

“Good boy!” Stephanie said, gently rubbing his ears, “you’re the only one who isn’t beastly to me!”

She washed the mud away from her face and hands with freezing cold water from the tap in the yard and parried her mother’s queries about the scratches on her knees with a tall tale about taking a tumble from her bicycle.

She changed her clothes and went right back outside to fetch the saddle. Practice, practice, practice, she repeated to herself. Revenge would

be a dish best served cold on Jemima Aiscue.

It was soon the week of the show and Stephanie began to tremble at the thought that Jemima would again try to put her threats into practice. She had the means, opportunity and motive, and Stephanie fretted all evening about what she could do to protect Shadow. She scoured the house and garage for a padlock and tried for an age to force her bicycle lock through the hasp on the stable door but to no avail.

The evening before the show she decided that she would stay awake all night watching the stables and, for added protection in case she dozed off, she had hung a tassle of silver bells from an old Christmas decoration on the inside of the door. Their brisk tinkling should be enough to warn her that someone was trying to break in.

And so, clutching her torch, Stephanie crouched by her half-open bedroom window, shivering in the draught and peering out into the darkness of the yard and the stables beyond. Every clink and patter, every night-owl screech, made her jump up and shine her torch out into the murky shadows, but she stayed vigilant and counted the hours passing by the chimes of the village clock. Eleven, twelve, one...

Stephanie woke up with a start. The sound of the bells jangling wildly went through her like an electric shock. She looked at her watch: Eight-twenty am. It wasn't possible! When Shadow had needed her protection most, she had failed him. The spirit had been willing but the flesh was weak. She jumped up from the window, pulled-on her wellies, and picking up an umbrella as a makeshift weapon she ran down the stairs and out towards the stables.

The bells were jangling even louder and just as Stephanie steeled herself to run the intruder through with her umbrella she rounded the corner and stopped in disbelief. The yard was full of people and even a police car. By the stables a man in overalls was dusting one of the doors for fingerprints.

"What happened!" She demanded from her mother who was talking with one of the policeman.

"Jemima Aiscue has disappeared," she said, "It seems she sneaked out of her house in the middle of the night and came in this direction. Have you seen her?"

Stephanie shook her head and pushed past the crowd to get to Shadow. He neighed in greeting and Stephanie checked him all over for any signs of foul play, but he was hale and hearty.

Her mother told her that after the alarm had been raised, Jemima's parents had searched her room and found her secret diary under the mattress. In its poisonous pages Jemima confided that it had been she who had cut the saddle strap, and God-forgive her, had mixed dried Ragwort leaves into poor old Sooty's feed. It seemed that Jemima had taken her Swiss Army knife and stolen out across the fields to the stables dressed only in her dressing gown and yellow polka dot pyjamas in order to nick Shadow's hamstrings and lame him just before the show.

The stable door was unlatched, but of Jemima Aiscue no trace could be found. The police finished their search around Stephanie's house and teams of people began beating and scouring the countryside beyond. Police frogmen dived into the black pools of the river and dragged the village pond; they even rounded up the local gypsies for interrogation, but no clues were ever uncovered as to the unfortunate Jemima's fate.

The village pony show was due to go ahead that afternoon, and to Stephanie's relief they decided not to cancel. It was a complete triumph. Stephanie and Shadow won prize after prize and after the final event she stood proudly on the podium to receive the award for best-in-show champion.

At home afterwards, the trophy took pride of place on the family mantelpiece and Stephanie pinned the fluttering surfeit of winner's ribbons onto Shadow's stall. She groomed him thoroughly, sorted his tack away and offered him a treat of his favourite steak to celebrate, but he didn't seem to be hungry.

She was mucking out the stable and shovelling the unmentionables into a bucket when she saw something mixed up amongst them, something that must have formed part of Shadow's last meal. It was a small Swiss penknife and wrapped around it was a tattered piece of bright yellow polka-dot fabric. She held her nose and looked closer. Scattered throughout were small crushed fragments of what looked like, could it really have been... bones?

"Oh Shadow!" She wagged her finger and scolded, "You are a naughty, naughty boy!"

Then smiling, she flung her arms around his strong dark neck, “But I love you!”

Getting Warm by Gary McMahon

The fire cast strange shadows around the room, like groping fingers, and Becky felt them tugging at her hair as she sat staring at her guest across the table. She picked up her glass, took a sip of good Highland scotch, and then replaced the glass on the table.

“Do you ever feel like it changed you?” Sandra had not spoken for several minutes, and her words came as a shock. “I mean, changed you inside?”

Becky smiled. Shook her head. “No. I refused to let that happen. I still refuse. We went through hell out there, but I’m still the same person.”

Sandra glanced at the window, at the snow pasting the edges of the pane, and then returned her gaze to Becky. “Is that why you live in the middle of nowhere, all alone in this cabin? Because it didn’t change you – he didn’t change you?” She licked her lips. The tip of her tongue was small, fat and pink, like the bald head of a baby rat.

“Listen,” said Becky, straightening her spine against the back of the chair. “I didn’t ask you here. You just took it upon yourself to come. What business do you have casting aspersions on my life, the way I’ve conducted myself?”

The cabin roof groaned beneath the weight of the snow. It sounded like something stirring up there, waking from a long sleep.

“I’m sorry.” Sandra stood up and walked to the window. She stared out at the vast white wilderness. “That was...presumptuous of me.”

“To be honest I think a lot of the things you’ve said and done have been presumptuous.” Becky pressed her feet against the floorboards and pushed the chair backwards, away from the table. The fire crackled, charcoal bursting like popcorn in the

heat. “When you wrote that book you didn’t even contact me. It would’ve been nice if you’d, like, asked my permission.”

She stared at Sandra’s back, but Sandra did not turn around. She stood with her arms folded, staring out of the window. Snow fell like television interference on the other side of the glass.

“You talked about me on that TV show as if I was just a character in your book, not a real person.” Becky’s anger was like a slab of ice in her belly. “You even took all the credit for getting us out of there, painting me as...as some helpless bitch who could barely even think on her own.”

She stopped, falling silent. This was pointless: Becky knew what she had done, how she had manipulated the facts to make herself look good, to turn herself into the heroine, to sell copies of her book. They both knew it, and to put it into words was hardly worth the effort.

“I’m sorry.” Sandra was still facing the window, but her body had relaxed. Her arms were now hanging straight down by her sides. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. We were in it together – we were equal.”

“No, we were never that.” The words were out before she could stop them. She bit her lip, trying to prevent any further poison escaping into the world.

“I deserve that,” said Sandra, finally turning around. The firelight lit her face in a gentle red glow, rendering her inhuman. Her mouth was open. Becky had never before noticed that she had such sharp teeth. “When he took us and locked us in that basement, we became equal. We weren’t before, and we aren’t now. But during that space of time – that week of hell – we both became victims. We were the same, bonded by blood.”

Becky stood and approached the fire. She felt cold, shrivelled. She held out her hands to warm them on the flames, but they remained icy. Her fingers, when she stared at them, did not look like they belonged to her body. They had been grafted there, taken from someone else and surgically attached at the bone. They were like steel. Like knives. “We were never the same, Sandra...” She could say no more. Her thoughts were confused, a flurry of blankness, like the falling snow outside. “Never.”

She heard Sandra’s footsteps as she walked across the cabin floor: they were light, hollow, barely there at all. “You have changed,” she said, softly. “All this isolation, and the fact that you can’t even look me in the eye when we speak...everything. It’s all different.”

“You never knew me,” said Becky. “Not really. We were in extremis. All you ever saw was my fear, my terror. Other than that, we’ve never really met before.”

The footsteps stopped just behind her. Sandra’s voice, when it came, was like hot breath on her neck. “But that week when we were down in the

basement. When he tortured us...we knew each other in a way that two people never can. We were more intimate than lovers.”

Becky was still cold. Her hands, her body, her heart. Cold as ice.

She turned slowly, resigned now that she needed to be honest. Brutal. “You’re fooling yourself. You created something in that damned book of yours – a fiction. It never really happened, not like you say it did.” Think about it. Remember how it went down, that last night. Remember what I did.”

Sandra’s eyes emptied, and then, like a jug filling with water, they gradually took on a knowing quality. Shadows grasped at her shoulders, but her face was bright and fire-lit.

“Remember that it was me who killed him, despite what you wrote in your stupid little book.”

Sandra nodded. Her face had taken on a look of gauntness, a quality much like death. “Yes, you did.”

Becky reached out and placed her cold, cold hands on Sandra’s shoulders. “I killed him and I liked it.”

Sandra’s eyelids fluttered like tiny trapped birds. Her bottom jaw hinged open. That small, bloated tongue lay motionless in her mouth.

“I enjoyed it so much that it made me realise my entire life had been a sham. You were right: I did change. I changed for the better. Everything I thought I’d been before was an act, a movie role. Killing that bastard opened doors inside me that I’ve not been able to close.”

Sandra was shaking now; her shoulders twitched.

“That’s why I’ve retreated here, to live in silence. It’s why I never turned up at any of your book signings, or went on daytime television to talk about what happened to us. Because I’m like him, the man who took us. If anyone ever met me properly, it was that man. We were like lovers, as close and intimate as two human beings could ever be. He saw inside my skin; he peeled it away to reveal my truth.”

Sandra backed away, her thigh brushing against the table. A piece of cutlery – a fork or a spoon – clattered to the floor, making too much noise in the quiet of the cabin.

“Just go,” said Becky, returning to her seat. She sat down slowly, without making any sudden movements. She was cold. So very cold. But

the danger only ever appeared when she felt warm – when the fire her captor/first victim/teacher had started inside her burst into life. “Go now.”

Without saying another word, Sandra grabbed her padded coat, threw it on, and opened the door. Snow rushed in, scattering like confetti across the floor. The wind howled a greeting. The door slammed shut. Sandra was gone.

Becky closed her eyes.

Sandra would not get far, not in this weather. And even if she did, Becky knew her publisher’s address. She was certain that she could get them to talk.

She opened her eyes and moved away from the table, walked back to the fire. She took the book – Sandra’s monstrous book – from the mantelpiece and opened it to the correct page. She sat down on the floor, in front of the fire, removed the bookmark and began to reread a story whose two versions she already knew by heart.

The flames reached for her, but she was cold, right down inside where those doors stood open. If she read for long enough, and stayed there next to the fire all night, perhaps she might start to get warm.

Susannah by Jessica Lawrence

This poem was inspired by the real life story of Susanna North who was born in Olney Buckinghamshire in 1621 and emigrated to Massachusetts when she was a child. She like many independently thinking and outspoken women in her time, was accused of witchcraft, tortured and executed. Susanna was known locally as being "of remarkable personal neatness, very outspoken, contemptuous of authority, and defiant in the face of slander." Her persecutors fabricated fantastical tales of debauchery that had nothing to do with the lives any of the accused women actually led. Susanna represented herself at her trial and did so with remarkable calm and candour considering she was facing an almost certain death sentence.

For more information see:
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nwa/sm.html>

A black cat crossed her path
conjured up from the dark and
with a sideways glance stepped
back into the circle of her
smouldered past - a ring of ash
on the blackened grass, a crowd,
a cross, some oil and tar,
black blood
beating in a burning heart.

Hair and bones and teeth
and flesh, a shred of cotton
from a sackcloth dress, a rope, a rod,
a black leather book,
a hatchet swinging from
a butchers hook,
coal and flame

a black silk mask, a stake,
a chain
that links her past.

A black cat stepped
on a churchyard grave
as a woman in black
called out his name,
“Come, come, Ebony come”
eyes like emeralds
glint in sun, fur like the
sky's November nights, polished,
buffed, obsidian bright.

Ebony slept by the fireside
on pillow of moss and rabbit hide,
under the bundles of
sage and thyme, lavender
burdock, cowslip wine, hawthorn
berries, bark of pine, belladonna
extract, dried apple rind.
Camomile, comfrey, forget-me-not,
eyebright, scabious, nettles and hops -
hang from a beam in braided knots.

Cat, crow, raven and dog,
a black horse galloped in
the coastal fog, a black caped man
with cracked leather boots,
face and forehead pocked with scars
. kicks the horse with razored spurs.
Blue eyes tearing in searing wind,
lips contorted in a twisted grin.

Satchel of metal and ropes

and pins, mind full of knives
to gauge out sin. He likes the
rope at the base of the neck -
their screams when the thumbs
and fingers are pressed.
He creates the stories the
girls confess.

They slither through doorways
as cats and toads,
make women barren and
poison wells. They suffocate
babies by casting spells
and fly on brooms when
the moon is full.

He makes up the stories the
women confess. He likes the
one he forced from old Bess:
A spider inside her from the
devil's own mouth, crawled out of
her belly to her master's house,
it bit him and bled him like a
black horse fly and scuttled
to the sockets in the back of his eyes;
the proof, the reason, her master
went blind.

Susannah
will get to taste the fury
of the hunter, the lawyer
the judge and the jury.
Under moonlight they tracked
her down with the Lord of the
Manor's hunting hounds, she fled
on foot, no shoes she wore, the brambles

and thorns, her flesh they tore.

They snatched Ebony up by his
jet black tail and dragged
her screaming to the Sheriff's jail.

The Lord of the Manor-
she carries his child, her
belly swollen, her brown eyes wild.
Ebony - demon, black furred toad
guts spilling out on the south bound road.
The cat accused, a witch's familiar
and Susannah a devil - lucifer's dealer,
of potions and portions of poisons and
blood; teats on her for Satan to suck.

A terrifying mob of
slavering men wrecked
Susannah's house and set to flame-
the wreathes of herbs for
fever and colds, the tonics for
babies, drafts for the old.
Camomile, nettle for the
worn and tired and belladonna
extract for a women with child.

Witch, Witch, midwife, nurse,
works for the devil, the
coin in his purse. Witch,
Witch, demon vile,
how many men did you beguile?

Weaver, washerwoman,
seamstress, cook, victim of the
words in a black leather book.

Craven raven, cat and dog,
you change yourself
from newt to frog.
Admit the sins that you commit,
devil's artifice in long black dress,
heretic, witch, confess, confess.

He pricks
her skin with his satchel
of pins and his eyes light
up when he hears
her screams and his lips contort
in a twisted grin.
A dimple, a pimple,
a small black mole, proof
she sold the devil her soul.
Three small scars upon her
cheek - the devil's toes,
his hoof and cleat.

Susannah
burned on an August day, near
to the church where her
mother lay, her mother cried out
for her child to save but was
muffled by the dirt on her Christian
grave, marked with a cross
and a date and a prayer; the priest
set fire to Susannah's hair,
to stop the flames from spitting
too far, he smeared her skin
in oil and tar.

On an August day
in 2005, a cat walked
on a grave with his head held high,

his paws tip toed over lush green grass
his jet black tail like
a proud ship's mast.

A woman in black
with dark brown eyes,
where Susannah's mother lies -
at the side of the Church
under deep blue skies,
beneath the layers of sultry earth
five hundred years
since she gave birth,
saw a cat the colour of night,
polished, buffed, obsidian bright.

She called the cat, she said
his name, and to
Susannah sweet Ebony came.

The Ides of December by Jessica Lawrence

I should have been born in June
When the bluebells are brightly in bloom
And the sun's soft rays in a leisurely way
Play on the waves of the Froom.

I should have been born in May
When the lambs lay down in the hay.
After running so fast on the succulent grass
And bleating and leaping all day.

Why wasn't I born in the spring
When the birds are out on the wing?
Building their nests and with every breath
They sing and they sing and they sing.

I wish I'd been born in the Fall
When the maple trees stand so tall.
The end of September, leaves burn like embers
And geese give their migration call.

But I was born on a day in November
Thrice as cold as the Ides of December.
I was young, I was old, I heard a bell toll
This poem a leaf to remember.

A Study in Solitude by Jessica Lawrence

I have been haunting
my house for two
weeks, it could be
years and if I didn't
feel my head fixed
to my neck or my
breath vibrate in my
throat I might believe
I am dead. But the
mirror whispers back,
its mouth moves when
I speak, its eyes open
when I wake, if it's a
book I am a page.

For two weeks,
a blotter for ink,
a pallet of browns
and greys, a tattoo
of sepia shades.
I am soldered by
copper and lead
my limbs move like
the tin man's legs,
my right hip plays
ventriloquist to
a stiff upper lip.

Two weeks after
release from
the black hole of
a hospital bed

I am still wearing
my gown open
at the back, revealing
the body's folds and sags.
I can't reach behind
to untie the knots or cut
off the tags.

Who ever saw Sisyphus
in a hospital shift, attached
to a pole, lugging his
boulder up and down
the hall? I am peddling my
feet to power a mill
like Oscar Wilde from his
prison cell, what a waste
of a life, waste of a man,
and here ladies and gentleman
I am.

The doll in the paper weight
covered in snow, the miniature
mannequin in plastic clothes.
I am a researcher conducting
a study on my self, the rat
in the hole, a solitary cornflake
in a bowl!

Solitude is a capsule
like an oyster shell, a pearl
shucked off the tongue - for some.
But I count the discarded shells,
echoing like stones thrown
down a dry well.

The Woman by Tony Lovell

Her father was on the dark horizon, frozen still inside the tractor cabin, looking out into the trees.

“Elly,” her mother called, “you’re trailing that towel in the muck. Concentrate, girl.”

Elly pulled up the towel’s corner and ran before it could fall again. Over the edge of the hill she could hear the wind in the trees, bringing dark clouds that swallowed the land with shadow.

Inside the house her mother was hanging up the clothes. “You want a bath tonight?” She said, adding too fast for Elly to reply, “Of course you do.”

After they were finished they sat down beside the fire. The damp wood whistled and squealed, the dry making chalky sounds as miniature landscapes collapsed in on themselves. “Untuck your legs, girl, it’s bad for them,” her mother said, for once not adding how sick, she was, of saying it and that she had already told her a million times.

They shared the big deep bath while the wind howled. Elly tilted her head like a dog, listening out for something else. “It’ll be your dad,” her mother said, eyes closed, as if she could see him that way.

Both of their legs were a tangle. Elly thought for a moment she couldn’t tell whose legs were whose, even though she could see and feel them.

It was cold, later, in her room. The window was shut but the curtains were stirred by some sneaky draught that made Elly burrow into her blankets and listen for creaks in the corridor, words that might break the quiet of her parents.

She must have slept because there was no warning when she opened her eyes to see her mother in the doorway. “Your Aunt Elaine is ill,” mother said. “She wants me to go and see her.”

“Oh.”

“Linda will be staying with you and dad.”

“For long?”

Her mother gave a sigh and closed the door.

Next morning Elly went up to the woods to hide. Mother was looking for her to say goodbye before driving off. There was no sign of father.

The day was freezing. Elly wore her sister's coat - brown and padded with a corduroy collar - and woolly gloves with butterflies on the back. After all the wind several trees had lost branches. Paths Elly had taken for granted were blocked for good. Yet the panic she felt wasn't new to her; it was a reminder that the wood was never the same for long, changed daily if you had the eyes for noticing it.

She would stay up here all day today. Later she would take a peek at the house and see if Linda was there, try to work out what kind of mood she was in. People changed, her mother said, we should always give them chances.

But Linda was frustrating. Whenever she came she was cruel, even in front of Elly's parents, then, quite puzzlingly, never leave Elly alone, follow her round when she was looking for some peace and start talking about dull adult things as if she hadn't done a thing wrong. It was like she was trying to be nice, like she was two people in one set of clothes taking turns to be different, the bad one (more than the good), unaware that its opposite existed.

It was such a shame about the fallen branches. Elly hated the ugliness of them, moved them when she was able. The paths were pretty things, the grass short and green, like carpet. It seemed, sometimes, as though nature didn't like itself, how it looked or felt, like it was maneuvering Elly into the role of caretaker, forgetting they were friends. But then during the spell of lifting and pulling she found herself forgetting about Linda, what she was like and her being there, and felt almost a sense of gladness that she was coming to stay.

Only when she got back to the edge of the woods and saw the car, and Linda rushing out to hug Elly's mother, did everything come back to her.

She woke up some time later under the dead oak, for a moment, not knowing how she had got there. She was wearing the dress again; it felt rumpled, clammy, back to front. Her stomach growled.

Linda was out in the yard back at the house - looking for Elly, no doubt, thinking up something horrible to say. Elly smiled and watched her before realising she might be seen, and not just seen but seen hiding and looking frightened and sad.

Then it struck her, that this might be a good thing.

The strands of Elly's feelings were knotted up in a ball of anger and fear. Weighed down by it she slumped by the edge of the trees and stared down at the little house. The more impatient she grew to get back there and eat and be warm, the more she thought of Linda in there doing those same things, the more her hate blossomed.

"I was worried about you," her mother said when Elly strolled as casually as she could up to the back door. "Weren't you hungry?"

"Yes. But it was worth it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. I mean, it was nice up there."

Her mother stared into her eyes. "Linda's here. Try and be pleased to see her. Her mum—my sister—is very ill."

But Elly could not feel upset. Her Aunt was distant, not very affectionate; she saw her only now and again.

"I might be going to stay with her."

Elly looked off into the fire. "Would Linda be here? With Dad looking after us?"

"Yes."

Elly laughed.

"Elly, don't. You know this situation is painful enough without this. This is so—naughty."

Elly resisted the urge to laugh again then felt sadness; people were naughty up to a certain age, an age she no longer was. Suddenly she wanted her mother to grab and hold her instead of ticking her off yet again. "You don't remember what she was like," she said, "What she used to do."

"She was just a kid, Elly."

"Cindy wasn't like her."

Her mother said nothing.

Elly went to bed early to hide and feign sleep, only to find Linda already in the room, perched in the dark on the end of Elly's bed. "Sorry," she said, standing slowly, lingering. "I know this is yours—I just like the view from this side." In the purple light of the town across the hills she was little more than a shadow, a strangely womanly figure. "I'm sorry I've got to be here."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," said Elly.

"But I am." The girl sat, her bed lower than Elly's. "Do you mind if we put a light on?"

Before Elly could answer she had done it, the light of the small lamp between their beds making the sky as black as oil. The girl wore pajamas, a snug pink top that showed slight but almost perfectly hemispherical breasts. When she lay down her feet touched the footboard. "I heard you talking with your mum," she said. "I didn't want to come here."

"You shouldn't sit in my bed."

"It was only for a minute. I only see flats where I live from my bedroom, remember."

"I don't. I've never been in your room, remember."

The girl rolled over, faced the wall. Elly picked up a book but could not stop looking at her over the top of it. Her size and proportions made the room seem cramped, shrinking.

"I'm glad I'm here," the girl said. "Home scares me."

Elly lay, still, not knowing what to say.

"I never realised what it was like for you when Cindy died."

"Your mum could get well. Cindy just drowned."

"I -" The girl tightened her clothes round her. "I was sorry, Elly" she said, quietly, "About how I was with you before. I was only a kid."

Her big body gave a shudder like she was beginning to cry. But then this was something she had always been able to do whenever she wanted, to get out of trouble.

Elly felt foolish hiding in the woods. When she went back to find Linda helping her mother it only made her angry, and then even angrier at the fact it fascinated her to watch them chatting cheerfully and sharing jokes in a way Elly and her mother hadn't for years. They were meant to be feeling sad, she thought, about Linda's mum, or worrying about where she. Elly,

was. It disgusted her that they didn't, that they were so lost in one another. They barely even noticed when she went back and took a book out on the back step and pretended to read. Her father had help in for the day and they were out over the fields. But then Elly's mother seemed to realise that Elly felt pushed out and her conversation and laughter with Linda and became subdued herself. When Linda's eyes met hers, Elly was certain she saw a hint of her own pretending.

She closed the book. The wind was up, giving the trees and hills a voice that seemed to call to her. For what was the first time she found herself annoyed at them, wishing they would just let her be for once.

"You should show Linda your woods," her mother said as they ate sandwiches filled with yesterday's meat, Linda had gone off to the toilet. "You've been getting on all right with her, it looks like."

Elly shrugged.

"It would be kind if you did. She said it again, you know, that she was sorry how she went on with you. I never knew what was happening. I thought it was both of you. What's happening with her mum will have changed things."

Elly smiled into her hand. This was all the girl's cleverness, a sign of how careful she was becoming. "OK," she said, suppressing a scowl. "I'll ask her."

Her mother reached over and seized her face in her hands. "Look at you," she said. "Such a sourpuss, such an old head on you." There was laughter in her voice, and it made the girl sad because it brought memories, reminded her she was not as little as she thought she was.

Elly had seen the girl looking into the trees, walking along the wood's border. Now and then she would stop to pick up pine cones. Her curiosity was touching, something Elly recognised and understood.

"I have to go tonight," Elly's mother said, later. "Elaine is very poorly now. I've no idea when I'll be back."

When she left, the house was all theirs, Elly's father nowhere to be seen. The girls played a kind of hide and seek with one another, Elly going to another part of the house whenever Linda left her for a moment, the girl—like in the old days—finding her as fast as she could, yet trying desperately not to show Elly she knew she was doing it deliberately.

Dad came back in the dark. It was odd seeing him in the kitchen, doing the things

Elly's mother normally did. He kept his big dark outdoor coat and cap on while he cooked something in the microwave, overheating some things while leaving others patchily cold. "You know how to warm up tins," he said, "Wherever they are." He looked lost, as if he was in a toy shop.

"I hate caps on people," Linda said later, in the bedroom. "They make people look older than they are."

Elly thought this, but wouldn't say it.

"Boys wear them in town." Linda studied her nails, all bitten like boys'. "Like little men, they look—little old men."

Elly tried to remember the last time she saw a boy outside of school. The other girl's life seemed suddenly strange and rich, adventurous. "Do you know any boys?"

"A few."

"Have you kissed any?"

"Maybe."

Elly remembered a boy she did find once, squatting at the bottom of a pipe in her father's land. His trousers were down round his ankles but she couldn't see anything, just white limbs and red face and a pile of shit he'd left. He'd climbed out all flustered and been so embarrassed she'd felt protective and sorry for him. They ended up spending the afternoon playing in a way that she hadn't played with any girl she'd known. It formed a pleasant memory, spoiled when she kissed him on the cheek, made him blush more than he had at the pipe and set him running off without a word.

"Tell me," she said.

"Of course I have," said the girl. "One or two."

A sound came from the wall behind Linda, Elly's father thumping about in his room, clicking the light off and creaking down into his bed.

It was strange for the house to be so dark and still so soon, him to be up there; he usually stayed up late and came to bed after Elly's mother.

"Why don't you want to see your mum?" Elly whispered after a while.

The girl didn't answer. Elly became tense with all the darkness and the silence. She felt alone.

Outside, the wind wailed, stroked the trees and the grass on the hill, nudged things about in the yard and set them rolling and clattering. It felt as if it was looking for something, Elly thought, and the image made her curl, lie unnaturally still, slow down her breathing and, as best she could, her thoughts.

She could sense Cindy at times like these, feel her wandering about the house, standing outside her door in the hall. She would remember what had happened at the lake and the strange time that had followed, everyone seeming to go off somewhere in their own heads and coming back not the same.

Only her mother understood this fear of the sound of the wind. She would have come into the room by now and held her daughter, her usual awkwardness with Elly forgotten, as if it was a kind of fear she had had herself.

In the next room the bed gave another creak as her father turned.

“Will you show me your woods today, Ell?”

Elly’s father had woken them at six by switching on the bedroom lights. He left without speaking. Elly could tell Linda was surprised because she looked lost and anxious.

“It’s not a good day,” Elly said.

“I thought it was warm.”

The girl knew she was trying to put her off. She probably dreaded the idea of a day alone in the house, the gruff father and his standoffishness, the way he came in sporadically and created the kind of horrible suspense Elly had grown accustomed to.

“I know you think of them as your woods,” Linda said. “I know they’re special to you.”

Elly looked into her face for a sign she might be joking then realised she might no longer be able to read faces. After all, she met other girls only occasionally—there were only four at the school in the village and she hated them. They were all older than her lived practically next to one another and were close friends. They went into town together, wore modern things and stuck to each other like glue. Elly wished them all under the ground being ploughed up every year into fertiliser. “I just like being away from the house, avoiding mum’s jobs.”

“And your grumpy dad.”

Elly felt a jolt of emotion, a sudden protectiveness. “Don’t say that,” she said. “He works hard. You saw how early he gets up.”

“My dad gets up at that time and drives all the way to London and he isn’t grumpy.”

“The tractor isn’t warm, like a car. He does all the work on his own now, too, since Stan went.”

“Stan’s gone?”

Why should it matter to her, Elly thought, before remembering all the little looks she’d seen Linda give him, all that rising up and twirling of hair around her finger?

“He - he got a job in town,” she said. “He didn’t like the cold.”

She thought she saw the other girl smirk. “You want to see all our woods and land, then,” she said.

They hardly spoke there was so much to notice. Elly saw buds in the branches, the strange stalks of new ones poking up from the soil, and a strange brightness to the grass. “It’s all a path,” she said, taking her time to answer Linda’s question. “It’s just you can hardly see it if you don’t know it’s there.”

“I want us to follow it. I’m sure we can climb over.”

Linda winced as the branch Elly let go of whipped back at her. The girl was quite awestruck at the beauty of the place. She kept wanting to stop and study things. Elly kept moving her along. “It’s only trees,” she told her. “Nothing to get so excited about.”

”I suppose,” Linda said, studying a sticky bud she had pulled from a willow.

Elly found Linda’s enthusiasm difficult. It made her see it all afresh, even differently.

“I could believe in fairies here,” Linda said, bravely. “These mounds look like houses.” She stooped to study them.

Elly felt suddenly silly. “They’re mouse holes.”

“But it looks like a proper garden around it. I feel like I want to wait and see if any come out.” Then squatted and took a stick and poked it in the entrance.

“Be careful,” Elly said, stifling a shriek, “It’s only animals.”

How she hated the look in the girl's eyes, the wonder she normally experienced felt like it was being stolen. "Look," Linda said, "We're near the lake."

Elly said nothing, kept walking. The path broke off and down to a cleft at some water's edge, the grass curled over either side of a disc of smooth, hard earth the width of a single body. On either side grass and reeds grew shoulder high and made a kind of passage.

Linda stared out across the water, to the other side, dark under the cover of the trees. She fumbled for a stone and dropped it into the water, breaking the mirror smoothness, the reflection of the dark trees at the opposite bank. "Does your dad own this lake?"

"No. It's nobody's."

"It's where Cindy died, isn't it?"

Elly had come to love the lake, despite everything it had taken. She found herself talking to her sister there, all anger and sadness at first, then more casual, day-to-day things about home and school. Then after a while she came to realise it was the lake itself she was speaking to. Once she had even crouched where Linda was now and peed into it, just to make herself more connected. And still from time to time she spread her hands flat over the surface and told herself she could feel the waxy layer the insects walked on, all the while trying not to let break it. She had never swum in it, or even dipped her feet.

"It feels nice here," Linda said. "I thought it wouldn't but it does. I thought it'd feel haunted."

"Would that frighten you?"

"Not as much as it would your house..."

Elly looked back at her. "You're scared of my house?"

The girl tore off the top of a reed and started shredding it, making a mosaic on the water with the pieces.

All of a sudden Elly knew she was very close to Linda, whatever other feelings there were. She never needed to know her reasons for doing or thinking anything, knew them all before she could say. Even worse, Linda knew it, too - it was why Elly had hated her; she made her feel as if she was being followed by a mirror.

The girl threw the rest of the reed into the water. "I thought I saw Cindy once, going past her old room door that time I slept in it. I used to

think I heard her when you'd all gone to bed."

Elly watched as every one of the ripples made their way to the circling banks. "What did she look like?"

"I only saw her dress. A night-out sort of thing. And it wasn't you because she was too tall, and not your mum because I could hear her down the stairs talking to your dad." Her voice was dry and even dull, no fear or awe in it like there might have been if she was telling a made-up story.

"You should have told me."

"You would have thought I was taking the piss. It's why we were always fighting."

The words were said with such a snarl it felt like a blow. Elly's hand sank into the icy water. "No," she said. "It was always you. You hating me."

"You had all these things, this place. You never seemed happy about it."

"Only till Cindy died."

"No. Before that. Still." The girl kicked at the earth, a stone or something, walking off now, calling over her shoulder. "Do you still hear the wind, Elly?"

Elly sat, still as one of the stones, as if the moment might not notice her.

"You do, don't you?" The girl let out a laugh. "You know it's only you can hear it, don't you? You and your jippy lugs, from that bash your dad gave you."

Elly thought of the stranger somewhere out in the fields, the one she used to think she could fathom. The day Linda conjured was not clear because it had never felt real – it felt as if it was in the kind of box where one might keep a bad dream or terrible tragedy.

"I think he did it because you've always been a bit of a misery," the girl said. "Even before what happened to Cindy. He knew you weren't grateful either."

A curtain rose inside Elly. Beyond it lay a sense of space and light. She did not know how long she ran, was not aware of any single tree or shooting fern or budding branch, not heading in the direction of the house and the man who haunted it with his absence.

The woods circled her like her mother's arms.

She found herself in a place where the ground twisted, a broken spiral of ditch and stone. Trees struggled, roots standing out like a bird's clenched feet.

At the split oak, she fell and hugged her knees to her chest. The tree was dead, but it never felt as though it was. To Elly it still moved in the seasons, changed with them, lowering what branches it had to the ground to greet her in some and keeping them aloft as if it didn't want to know in others. It was as though it knew her better than she knew herself, when she needed help or not. The moods that accompanied them felt tangible, like steps or handles, things that drew a person along to where they might no longer be needed.

She sighed and her body shook. Sometimes it felt like someone was just along the way, waiting for her, knowing what was right and what would pass.

The wind came, gentle and cold. She dipped an arm into the dark hollow, the coolness was like water. She found the gown that hung inside. Taking it down, she stroked it, the softness and the warmth like somewhere far away, part of the waiting thing.

She climbed inside and stood. Her head touched the top of the space and was cradled in rotten wood and shadow. She slipped out of her clothes and into the dress.

Linda had no idea where she was, now. It felt cold, the stupid girl's wind searching through the trees, flicking at the grass and thin branches, winding round inside the hollows and the shadows.

She had no idea why she had said the things she'd said. The feelings that had caused them now seemed to have left her. They felt slight and unreal, and when Elly found Linda, she would surely accept her "sorry".

Here was the path at the edge of the lake, the little disc of hardened earth. She had gone full circle, but didn't mind; alone she felt different, she could gather herself back, crouch and watch the wind as it etched the surface.

But then as she watched the water calmed and became mirror. A movement inside it caught her eye, a break in the clouds, a stirring in the branches, a pair of pale bare feet taking up-and-down steps along the opposite bank, the edge of a whitish dress a little way above knees.

It was an adult, a woman, taking her time in the way people did when they believed they were alone.

The girl did not know why she should feel so afraid of this presence. “Elly,” she said under her breath, knowing the girl would be far away by now, that the farmhouse would be difficult to find without her. “I’m sorry.”

Then she sat, alone for certain, crying like a child.

Think Belsen by Terry Grimwood

“Think Belsen,” said the glossies. “Extreme-crop is the must-have of the season; show off those prominent bones, that concave midriff. Forget tits and bums, ribs and scapula are the new cleavage.”

“Fink Belsen,” proclaimed professional celebrity Verity Blane, self-starved into a wheelchair and example to women everywhere. “Less is more right? So who was less than all? You know, them in Belsen. It’s sort of the ultimate. What every woman attains for.”

Thinking Belsen, however, didn’t prevent Anna Meade from setting off a low grade alarm as she followed her best friend into the Normal Woman Mall. She froze, sunken cheeks aflame as the warning voice oozed prettily from the door speaker.

“I’m sorry, but you may not match the size criteria set by the retail outlets in this building.”

“It was probably your sweater,” said Cherry leaning on her Gucci walking stick, shaven-headed and gorgeously gaunt. She shivered in the extreme-crop she wore. Her ribs rose and fell like the folds of an accordion as she panted for breath. Cherry was always ready with an encouraging word, no matter how stupid you had been, and surely coming back to the mall a mere six weeks after childbirth qualified as stupid.

Cherry had a point about the sweater. Its mohair filaments were fluffed-up enough to have brushed the sensor.

“Maybe,” Cherry looked suddenly awkward, “you know, maybe we should split up and meet for coffee in *Aztec* in an hour.”

Anna didn’t want to split up. This was her first mall-time for almost three months. She needed Cherry at her side.

“I mean,” Cherry went on. “I’ve got, like, some so-boring shopping to do before we get down to the real work.” She was

lying wasn’t she? The alarm had rattled her. “See you in an hour Anna, in *Aztec*, yeah?”

And she was gone, melded into the amorphous hurry of paste-fleshed, grave-thin shoppers.

Panicked, Anna wondered if she should make her escape now and go to the Outsize (Fat Pig) Mall instead. No shame in it. Some women couldn't maintain size-minus, especially after childbirth. God, some women never achieved it at all. At least she had been a size-minus once, the result of focus, sacrifice and three emergency hospitalisations.

No.

She – correction, her sweater - had barely brushed the sides of the door. The main alarm had not sounded. Anna Meade had every right to be here.

Reassuringly hunger-dizzy, she set off towards the main concourse, leaning heavily on her Miss Selfridge, pearl-headed cane as she shuffled bravely past the Great Escalator that sighed its frail, featherlight human burdens through the mall's five levels of retail Nirvana. Music soothed and excited, lyrics interlaced with subliminal suggestion. Giant screens played the latest music vids and the latest ads, in most cases, one and the same.

And repeated, over and over was the critically-acclaimed Think Belson ad for No-Food Yoghurt.

Exterior: *Age-greyed, real-life footage of a concentration camp. Shaven-headed, cadaverous figures gaze, dead-eyed from behind barbed wire.*

Cut to -

Interior: *Actor-models Kara King and Natisha When stand at a large table, sorting through a pile of clothes, shoes and suitcases. The two actors wear the standard striped prison tunics, unbuttoned enough to show off cleavage and prominent ribs. They are superimposed onto a real-life background. The table is also stock footage although the section nearest to the actors is a prop, blended into the real article. The colour scheme is the same ancient monochrome quality as the original. Other prisoners are glimpsed at the same table - actual footage cut into the shot.*

Kara: *Straightens and wipes her brow. Strands of hair stick fetchingly to her face. God I'm so hungry. (Sound; slight crackly quality to suggest genuine soundtrack)*

Cut to Natisha, who does not look up from her work when she speaks.

Natisha: Don't be such a weakling. If they can do it (*Cut back to stock footage: A group of emaciated prisoners sorting through the same pile of belongings*) so can we.

Kara: But I can't fight it this time.

Natisha: (*Smiling with benign tolerance*) All right. (*Reaches inside her tunic to produce a small plastic pot*) I've got one last No-Food.

Kara: (*Alarmed*) But it's yoghurt!

Natisha: No-Food's a treat you can eat without ingesting any foodstuff whatsoever.

Kara: (*Taking and opening the pot*) But what about you?

Natisha: Willpower and vision. But sometimes I am a little tempted. (*Giggling, she dips her finger in the now open pot and licks it guiltily*).

Kara knocks her hand away playfully then turns to see her fellow prisoners and her grin turns to guilt. Tearfully, and with stoic generosity, she holds out the pot towards the camera. A hand appears in shot to receive it. A glimpse of striped prison tunic sleeve is seen.

Voiceover: No-Food. We all need a little help sometimes.

Kara King claimed that those tears were real and that the one minute ad was the hardest acting role she had ever undertaken. Anna believed her.

Anna decided to start her shopping in *Sin*, a cornucopia of size-minus couture, ruthlessly strict about the dimensions of its clientele. A foolish choice for a comeback, but walking into *Aztec* with a carrier bag bearing the famous logo (halo over the 's', the 'n' formed into the three prongs of a

Devil's pitchfork) would prove to Cherry that mohair really had triggered the warning in the Normal Woman's entrance.

Anna stopped to let an electro-chair glide past. Its owner nodded her thanks, the gesture obviously painful, the effort etched into a face made masculine by the absence of feature-forming fat.

Vile fat, foul fat, disgusting, filthy fat.

Yellow it was. Anna had seen it on Fat-Killers. The presenter had scooped a ladle-full out of a bowl. "How could we ever let such filth grow in our bodies?"

Fat, she said. Was a disease.

Anna hesitated at *Sin's* entrance. If she brushed the sides of this door, an alarm would definitely sound out her shame.

You are not fat, she told herself. You have given birth to a child and now, six weeks later you are in the mall wearing the same clothes you bought in this very shop before you fell pregnant. A little tight perhaps, but the same clothes.

So come on.

She twisted sideways, the action instinctive, and risky, because it was cheating and, as such, bound to be picked up by the door's profile sensors. She closed her eyes, stepped through.

And felt nothing, not the slightest contact.

Safe, dignity intact, she waited for her breathing to steady into its usual laboured gasp. She gazed about the shop. *Sin* was always a wonder, a place of hush, decorated with lush drapery, mosaic and sculpture. Classical music whispered from hidden speakers while customers worked the clothes racks in reverent silence, the only sound they made, the occasional hum of an electro-chair and rattle of hangers.

Anna took a step towards the nearest display.

"Madam." An assistant cut into her path. The woman leaned on her walking stick, hand trembling, face drawn deliciously tight over her skull, her skin jaundiced to an attractive yellow. "I'm very sorry." She spoke in a near-whisper, the soul of tact. "The alarm."

"But...it didn't..."

"Our alarms are discrete. We don't like scenes here at *Sin*. I am sorry."

Sorry, translated as serves you right you weak-willed cow.

Other shoppers looked up and round. Stares bore in, someone sniggered.

“My sweater...” Anna plucked a handful of mohair from the sleeve.

“Madam, I don’t think you’ll find what you are looking for here.”

A smile appeared, painted in glistening lipstick, a smile that barely hid fang and viper-tongue.

“I...I’m sorry...I uh...”

Anna stumbled, backwards, the rejection so physical it was like being pushed. She rushed out through the door. Dizzy, crying, she barged a tall, cadaverous mother who tugged her corpse-pale daughter close and hurried away. Crowds swirled, the vid screens blared.

Natisha: Don’t be such a weakling. If they can do it (*Cut back to stock footage: A group of emaciated prisoners sorting through the same pile of belongings*) so can we...

Anna glimpsed the *Aztec Coffee Café*.

Which was all but full. One table left, by the toilet door. Anna hurried through the clutches of the skin-on-bone elite who had gathered to converse in the furious, strenuously cultivated display of easy friendship necessary for the modern woman to maintain any shred of self-worth. She collapsed into the remaining seat and waited to be served.

No sign of Cherry, thank god, because Anna had not one bag to show for her time here.

The waitress arrived, patiently impatient.

“Skinny latte, no milk, no caffeine, no sweetener, not too much flavour and only a hint of colour. Oh, and a Full Comfort Platter, thanks.”

It was all right to indulge in here. Every table had a vomit bowl, and a long wooden throat probe was part of the cutlery.

Laughter, chatter, the long groan of vomiting and splash of regurgitated food, followed, of course, by the hiss of odour-sweet spray and gurgle of the auto-flush.

They knew. All of them.

That one, dabbing puke from the corners of her scarlet-rimmed mouth, her in the wheelchair who could hardly turn her head to look, the teenage princess over by the wall, peevish in her stomach-cramped, starvation

agonies. They could smell Anna's failure, could smell the fat flowing through her, robbing her of shape and form.

Anna sipped her newly arrived beverage, closed her eyes against the coffee-tainted water taste. She made to replace the cup on its saucer, but missed the table altogether and suddenly her skin-jeans were scalding hot and wet.

"Fuck!" She cried out and surged to her feet.

She ran, crashing out of *Aztec*, back out into the sea of bobbing, twisting heads with their long hair, short hair and chemo-baldness –

That stopped her.

Think Belsen...

No longer enough.

If they can do it so can we...

Real commitment was needed, a Verity Blane-style sacrifice.

Expensive, but some things were more important than money.

Will renewed, Anna left the Mall by the thoughtfully discreet emergency exit (the Shame Door) which she had never, ever used before.

Anna felt better once she was inside *Ultra-Med*. It was, after all a chemist, which meant that all sizes were welcome to pass through its non-alarmed doors; from the limping, breathless size-minus and uncomfortably curved size tens and twelves to the positively obese fourteens and sixteens.

Anna found an assistant, a middle-aged, gaunt-faced beauty who smiled a mouth-wide smile.

"How can I help love?" She asked, eyes hard and searching. They added a silent you fat pig to the question.

"I..." How could she admit to such failure as this? "I had a baby and now I can't seem to lose weight."

"Have you tried Felladine? Thin-Eze?"

Each time a nod, a mumbled yes.

"I understand there's something else..."

How many women asked that same question after the mandatory have-you-tried list?

"You mean the cancer pill."

Jesus, the word was like a club, a knife.

"Does it work?"

“The success rate is eight-five percent.”

“Do you really lose weight when you have...when the pills are working?”

“Oh yes, absolutely, but you need to be sure love. It’s a big commitment”

“I’m sure.” Was she? “Do...do I need medical help or anything? A prescription?”

“No. All you have to decide is breast or bowel.”

“I’m sorry?”

“What sort of cancer do you want?”

“I...I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Not many do.”

“What do you think?”

“I’m not allowed to think, but...” A quick glance about the shop then a conspiratorial lean forward and wave for Anna to come closer. “Bowel is better. Breast could result in you losing...you know.”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

“There are risks.”

Terrible, inconceivable risks in fact. But there were risks to being fat. Heart failure, they said, and social ostracism.

Anna nodded. “Bowel then,” she said.

The assistant reached behind the counter and produced an innocuous carton with an all-but unpronounceable name printed on the front.

“How much?” Anna asked, mouth dried by the reality of the little cardboard box.

The answer drove the air from her lungs.

“You’ll need a course of chemo-tabs as well.”

“No... I can’t afford...”

“You’ll die without them.”

The assistant produced the second box.

If they can do it so can we...

“I...I need to talk to my husband first.” Anna said.

“Take your time love, it’s a big decision.”

Anna fumbled for her phone then quick-dialled home.

She could hear the wall-vid in the lounge where Jason was, no doubt, sprawled on the sofa where he spent every Saturday afternoon. A football

crowd chanted. Jason belched.

“Hi Jase, its Anna.”

“Yeah?”

His eyes would be locked onto the screen, one puffy hand curled about the phone, the other about a beer can. Empties would be scattered about him, eviscerated snack bags spread over the carpet, spewing their crumbs onto the pile.

“How’s Shanna?”

“Asleep – oh fuck fuck. Bloody hell how could he have missed that?”

The crowd roared in sympathetic frustration – and joy in the case of the opposition.

Of course Shanna would still be asleep, the Mum-Free drops in her noon time feed were guaranteed to provide four hours of mall-time for Mum and footie time for Dad.

“Jase, I need some extra cash.”

“Yeah.”

“Shanna...I’m going to have to...I mean, it’s best if we do it now, before we get too attached to her, and we can always have another child.”

“Yeah.”

“One of the drug research institutes would be best. They’re always advertising for volunteers and unwanted...you know...They pay well too. Not that Shanna’s unwanted, not by me anyway. She’s not is she? Jase? Is she?”

“Nah – Oh you wanker!”

Crowd roar, several thousand agreeing with Jason’s assessment of the player in question.

“She’ll be looked after. Better than she is now probably. We’re both...you know...just so busy aren’t we?”

“Yeah.”

“I only have to sign an e-form in the shop. They’ll probably be round to collect her before I get home.”

“Right.”

“You will be there won’t you?”

“Yeah, yeah...ah shit. What the fuck is wrong with those bastards?”

Milk, Shanna smelled of milk and some sweetness Anna could never describe.

“Kiss her for me; tell her I love her won’t you.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll...I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, right.”

She hung up.

Turned back to the counter. The assistant had already produced a form-pad.

“Just put your forefinger on the screen love.”

Warm, Shanna was always warm, her skin, so soft it didn’t feel like real skin but something made to be kissed and touched and held.

Anna stared at the assistant, whose smile remained firmly in place, then at the pad.

And made the only decision possible.

The Trauma Book by Stephen Bacon

In two days a child will be born with a cleft palate because I don't want to lose my purse in the park. To prevent someone breaking into my car, an elderly woman will fall in her home and break her left wrist.

I'll explain.

I suppose it all started when my husband, Frank, died last year. I kissed him as he left for work that day, a damp October that scattered brown leaves across the road and caused the streetlights to wink through the gathering mist.

When I got the mid-morning call, I stared through the window with a puzzled frown. As I watched the police officers approaching along the path, a cold twist of anxiety shifted in my stomach. The sombre look on their faces conveyed the message that I needed to prepare for something.

They went through the details of the crash, what had happened. His car had skidded on wet leaves, fishtailing out of control, overturning into a ditch. The paramedics were there straight away but my husband was pronounced dead at the scene, massive head injuries.

So for the first time since we were married, I was alone. With my guilt.

There followed the usual 'Picking up of the pieces'. I spent the next six months reeling, my life cushioned only by the support of our son and daughter, and the speed with which I threw myself back into work. I moved out of our house to spend the first few months with Alison and her family. I told myself that I was supporting them as much as they were supporting me, but the reality was that I was frightened to go home. I knew the space that Frank and I had shared would be choked by memories. I dreaded returning to the familiarity of it all, and so I spent some time at our son, David's. That was an entirely different postponement than the one I'd taken at Alison's. David lived in a plush apartment and enjoyed the life of a single man. I think having his mother there must have cramped his style. It was fine at first, but as the weeks passed we began to grate on each other's nerves. I took this as a sign that it was time to move on with things. The inevitability of returning

home appeared less daunting, and so as spring swept in and the evenings grew warmer, I went back.

It was painful. The last two years of our life together had been tough, to say the least. I'd had a stupid affair with a man from the advertising firm at which I work, nothing more than a catalogue of one-night stands, really. I'd gotten almost over my head, contemplated leaving Frank. We went through a real rocky patch. The man I'd slept with managed to secure a promotion to a different part of the company; I threw myself at the mercy of my husband. He never said so, but I still wondered whether he had actually ever forgiven me. Certainly our marriage altered. There was, beneath the surface, a pulsing throb of resentment; an unspoken rift that was levering Frank away from me. We went through the motions for the benefit of David and Alison, although I had increasingly come to question whether Frank still loved me.

I sorted through the stuff we had shared and the years swept over me again, remembering the good times and counting myself fortunate, rather than brooding over the trouble. The house was filled with his absent whispers. I donated lots of stuff to charities, and smiled fondly as I organised CDs, filed photographs and tidied away Frank's belongings, albeit with a burden of suppressed guilt. And then one morning I found, amongst the papers and folders that were stacked in a bureau in his study, *The Trauma Book*.

It was a plain manila folder filled with papers. I began reading the first page and the more I read, the more I felt like the fabric of life was being torn from around me.

The setup of *The Trauma Book* was very much like a collection of lists, printouts involving dates and events that were ordered chronologically. The dates on the first page began in the mid-1970s, the paper yellowed and creased. Glancing at the first entry, I calculated it to be around the time we moved into this house, not long after we'd married. By the condition of the sheet it had been pored over many times, taken out and reread endlessly, and the first entry caught my attention instantly.

FIRE IN YOUR HOME – deducted. NEIGHBOUR'S DOG DIES – credited.

Frowning, I read on, the dates skipped over a couple of weeks.

FOOD POISONING – deducted. WORK COLLEAGUE'S CAR STOLEN – credited.

As I read through the entries I was aware of my hands shaking, fighting an overwhelming urge to throw up. A circular coffee-stain obscured part of an entry further on but I could still make out the text – BREAKING BEST DINNER PLATE – deducted. UNKNOWN TEN YEAR OLD CHILD RIPS FAVOURITE SHIRT – credited.

The events described in the lists were horrific. Yet some of the entries stirred a strange feeling, an uneasiness which gnawed at my memory. And then the telephone rang at that precise moment, and I almost forgot about the book.

“Hello?” My voice was flat and hollow.

There was a long pause and I almost replaced the receiver because the sound was a distant hum and static clicks, like wind rattling wires on telephone poles at night. Then came the voice.

“This event will occur sometime in the future – your son, David, will lose his job at the pharmaceutical company.”

I searched for an answer. Then the voice returned.

“Or – a man unknown to you will be imprisoned for a crime he has not committed. His term will be nine years. You have ten seconds to decide.”

I stared at a point on the back of my dead husband’s chair. I wanted to speak but the urge to listen was overwhelming. I was aware of traffic moving out on the road. In the garden, I watched my neighbour’s cat creeping around a bush.

“Three . . . Two . . . One . . . Your decision is required.”

I couldn’t even stammer out a question. I felt as if I were watching the events on a television screen.

“If a decision is not stated within the next five seconds, both events will occur sometime in the near future.”

I yelled into the phone. “The second one! The unknown man! Not David.”

The voice spoke instantly. “Thank you for your decision. We will be in touch again.” Then the line returned to the echoing bleakness of humming wires.

For minutes I sat in thought, the phone clamped in my hand. I wondered about the enormity of what I’d done. Not so much the actual events, but the self-aborrent nature of admitting my own selfishness. I tried to avoid thinking about the scenario of an innocent man facing a jail term.

And tears brimmed to my eyes at the ferocity to which I realised I'd protect my children.

How long I sat there cradling the phone, I have no real way of knowing. I was lost in a weird realm of time-distorted imagination. As clarity finally settled back over my mind, I became aware of the violent shaking that had seized my body. The very real possibility that bereavement had tipped my sanity, hit me like a truck.

I awoke much later to the splash of headlights across my ceiling, vague recollections of lurching to bed in the aftermath of the phone call. It was growing dark outside. My sleep had been absolute and dreamless.

For ages I lay thinking, trying to sort some rationality into the events that had occurred. My sleep had distanced the phone call into a hazy dreamlike suggestion, a recollection almost. I went back into Frank's study. It was just as I had left it.

The Trauma Book was where I'd dropped it in my urgency to answer the phone. I picked up the printed pages and shuffled them neatly into the manila envelope. Certain lines leapt out –YOUR SON WILL BE MUGGED, YOUR HEATING BOILER WILL BREAK-DOWN and YOU WILL LOSE YOUR WEDDING RING. These were all balanced with the credits A BLOOD DONOR WILL CONTRACT HIV, A WOMAN IN YOUR TOWN WILL DIE IN CHILDBIRTH and AN ELDERLY MAN WILL BE DISFIGURED IN A HOUSEFIRE. I tried to suppress the sickness I was feeling.

During the next week or so, I learned a great deal about how Frank had been feeling over the last two years. There were a number of journals in the bottom of his bureau, all handwritten. Flicking through them felt like I was cheating on him once again, yet I needed to read; needed to find out what his thoughts were on The Trauma Book. His journals were not details of the day's events however, but just reflections of his thoughts and feelings. Frankly it was all a bit vague, but what I was able to do was gain an overview of his feelings, especially by relating the dates to what was happening at the time.

It would be an understatement to say that he was very upset. His writing was full of self-doubt and disappointment. It was clear that he never once had any notion of leaving me, a reassurance that was not discussed at the time. In a way, he blamed himself – asking deep questions regarding his

own role as a husband and father. A lot of macho rubbish. Certain entries had a palpable atmosphere of self-loathing. As I read the journals, the guilt that I'd been wrestling with for the last two years seemed to smother me. As the entries continued, his feelings had fluctuated into anger and optimism; then a hint of jealousy crept in after a few months. The last dates he'd completed were many months before his death so I had no real insight into his feelings. But one thing was clear from his writing – he made no mention of The Trauma Book and there was no correlation between his anxieties in the journals and the dates in the manila folder.

The end result of me reading Frank's personal journals were a massive feeling of regret and an overwhelming desire to reverse time and just appreciate what I'd had with him. It's a cliché, but the air was humming with the words that I'd never said, things I'd left undone, times which we would no longer enjoy. I can't begin to describe how that feeling of wasted time wracked me with remorse.

I tried to move things forward. It felt almost like I was an imposter in Frank's house – a preposterous idea for a couple married for over 30 years – but one that I felt was real, perhaps because of the guilt. The very notion that Frank had spent the last couple of years - facing me at the breakfast table, breathing next to me in bed, watching television and chatting to me - in a seething rage of resentment and embittered discontentment, left me uneasy. A couple of days later all my concerns regarding Frank's emotions were forgotten when I received another phone call.

I'd returned to work part-time. I'd gotten over the uncomfortable glances and the awkward shuffled attempts at conversation. Things were beginning to resume an air of normality. One afternoon I left work early to visit the hairdressers. The cut and styling were completed very quickly and I went directly home.

I'd just had time to make a coffee and sit down in front of the television to catch the news when the phone rang.

"Hello?" Almost instantly I heard that unmistakeable dead air sound, a haunting echo that reminded me of wires clanging in the night breeze.

"This event will occur in your home-town presently – you will find a benign tumour in your stomach, which if discovered soon enough will be easily operable." The voice was lifeless and without emotion, although definitely male.

“Or – a child will be hit by a motorcycle and lose his left hand in the accident. You have ten seconds to decide.”

I’d love to tell you that I chose the tumour. Easily operable he said, right? But the horror of the word tumour stirred enough panic within me to cause my mind to freeze. I thought about how many people in the world coped just fine without a left hand, and thought the unnamed kid would probably cope just as well. As I spoke I almost didn’t recognise my own voice.

“The kid’s arm! His left hand!” The urgency in my tone was sickening.

“Thank you. This event will occur sometime in the near future.” The line disconnected.

I spent the next few weeks without the television. I refused to buy a local paper. The fear – the terror – of actually reading the news report and humanising this poor kid’s accident and subsequent maiming left me disgusted. At work I prowled the office with a blinkered attitude, a closed inquisitiveness.

A couple of weeks later I was crossing the road at a busy junction. I noticed a piece of ragged police tape fluttering from a lamppost and, glancing down, felt my heart lurch at the sand that had been sprinkled onto the roadside to cover something – maybe only oil – and spotted the glistening gems of glass that had been brushed to safety. I wondered if that was where it had happened. I spent the rest of the week crossing that road to the sound of screaming brakes and echoing thuds in my mind. Eventually I gave up, and began taking a different route to work.

This highlighted an important option to me – denial. If I didn’t answer any phone calls, how could I be contacted by them? I would have no more decisions to make, no more trauma to convey. I contacted the telephone company and disconnected the phone. I had already made inquiries as to where the calls had been made from – all without success. The numbers never appeared on any records so consequently I couldn’t get them to filter the calls out. I stopped using my mobile phone for the same reason. Slowly I was detaching myself from the 21st century.

Cocooned within the shell of my own home, I began to have disturbing thoughts regarding the television. The news became a nightly torture. I assumed that all of the horrible events that were reported were down to me.

They couldn't contact me so the terrible occurrences were the result of my neglect. I shared the despair and horror that the reports displayed. A few weeks later, I unplugged the television.

I called in sick at the office. I went to see a doctor and got him to sign me off work on the grounds that I was struggling with Frank's death. As I was on my way to buy some milk one morning, I noticed a white streak of graffiti on the wall of a nearby building – They Will Both Happen If You Fail To Choose. I glanced the other way.

For the next few weeks I barely left the house, venturing out only to buy food provisions. The house was perpetually gloomy, the blinds closed. I read no newspapers and the television remained unplugged. A couple of times a day I heard the distant wail of sirens, stomach lurching with the possibility that my unmade decision had thrust trauma into someone's life. How many people was I responsible for killing? What lives had I shattered with my cowardice, what events had been triggered by the choices that I rejected?

I opened a piece of mail one morning, delivered in a plain brown envelope with no return address. My name and address were typed. Though my hands were shaking uncontrollably, I had no problem reading the letter.

1) YOUR GRANDDAUGHTER ELLIE WILL BE BULLIED AT SCHOOL TO THE EXTENT THAT THE STRESS CAUSES TEMPORARY HAIR LOSS.

OR

2) A PAIR OF CONJOINED TWINS WILL BE BORN IN THE NEXT TWO MONTHS, BUT ONE OF THE TWINS WILL DIE WHEN THE ESSENTIAL OPERATION TO SEPARATE THEM GOES WRONG.

There was a telephone number below and a message that warned that both events would occur if there was no response within seven days. I actually considered ignoring it, but the thought of someone causing upset to Ellie broke my heart and injected some passion into me again. I scoured the small print, checked for watermarks, hunted for any address.

Nothing.

And it was then that I spotted the email address.

Glancing towards the laptop in the study, I suddenly realised that since his death, I had barely used what was essentially Frank's computer. I logged on impatiently and guessed the correct password on the third attempt – my name, rather surprisingly. In the search engine I typed in "TRAUMA BOOK STATEMENT". The results were meaningless, obviously there was no website. The only way to contact them was through email. I typed it up and sent it to the address given in the letter.

"CHOICE TWO. PLEASE TELL ME, WHOEVER YOU ARE, PLEASE STOP THIS CONTACT. I CANNOT COPE WITH THE PRESSURE OF CHOOSING THINGS. I WILL NOT RESPOND TO ANYMORE CONTACT FROM YOU."

As the email program opened to send it from the OUTBOX, my eyes were drawn instinctively to the INBOX.

In the back of my mind, I had always thought it strange that dates in The Trauma Book had finished a few months before Frank's death. I wondered whether it had simply ceased, or if they had found a new way of cataloguing the choices. It appeared that instead of sending him copies of the typed sheets in the post, they had started emailing them to him, all the horrific decisions that he'd made for the past few years were there in stark Times New Roman. There was even a folder within the INBOX for storing them. I scrolled down the list, skimming the chronological entries and in that instant I realised that they would never ever stop, that this was all a game to them, and that they would push things as far as you could imagine – and then further.

It's October. Cold winds have stripped the trees and ravaged the life from the garden. From where I am sitting in the study, I watch people hurrying along the street to their homes. Rain patterns the window like tears. Sometimes I see shadows in the garden and they recall happy summers and days without number stretching ahead filled with hope and promise. And then I remember they're just shadows.

They say that coping with the inevitable is much easier if you embrace the reality of the situation. That's what I've done. I've accepted all the emails, chosen the paths. But I was right about it being a game. The level of the trauma has been gradually increasing. Of that there can be no doubt.

Browsing the email listing of the Trauma Book, my eyes picked out an entry that slotted an aspect of my life into perspective. The insecurities that I'd been feeling recently were instantly banished and I felt a bolt of love impale my insides, leaving me breathless and wincing, silent tears caressing my cheek. An overwhelming surge of regret blurred my vision. What is it about humans that makes us reject the goodness and happiness that's within our grasp, and desire something else? In this moment, I truly understood love. I truly knew how Frank felt about me. I truly embraced the mistakes I'd made, and the shame I was courting became insignificant. The doubts I harboured about how he felt towards me were dispelled in that moment when I spotted an entry in Frank's INBOX.

1) YOUR WIFE WILL BE INVOLVED IN A MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENT AND WILL BE KILLED INSTANTLY.

OR

2) YOU WILL BE INVOLVED IN A MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENT SOMETIME IN THE FUTURE AND WILL BE KILLED INSTANTLY.

I didn't need to check the OUTBOX to know what his response had been. My body was deadened with sorrow and remorse. Just think about your own family – look at the faces of the ones you love and imagine being confronted with the same scenario – and try to think about the choices you would make. But the worse part of this revelation was the discomfort that was probing about in the back of my mind, the distressing notion that in the same situation, I might not have been brave enough to sacrifice myself for the love of Frank. The intensity of that notion will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Suicide is no longer an option.

The threat that my death will just pass this curse onto either David or Alison stays my hand and tears my heart. Sometimes I wonder – now that I've had a few weeks to consider things since I found the emails – whether Frank's decision to save me was out of love, or a twisted form of bitter revenge for the affair.

The absolute horror of missing an email and causing both events to occur has become an obsession. I sit constantly at the laptop, awaiting

contact. Night and day bleed through the window of the study and I leave the room only for food and the call of nature. Sometimes I watch as people pass along the street and I ponder their insignificance. Have they any idea how their fate might rest with the options I face? I wired the laptop up to the amplifier of the stereo system and I've cranked up the volume to the top. That way, if I happen to drop off to sleep and I get an email, the familiar tone that announces a new message will thunder through the house and jerk me awake.

The game that they're playing is getting more intense. I'm not sure how much more the level can be raised. I received the latest email only 20 minutes ago. The importance of the choices has never been trivial, but the actual magnitude of this one leaves me with no doubt that I am embarking on a path from which there is no return.

1) YOUR DAUGHTER AND HER FAMILY WILL ALL BURN
TO DEATH IN A HOUSEFIRE.

OR

2) A MAJOR TERRORIST ATTACK WILL OCCUR IN YOUR
CITY AND RESULT IN THE DEATHS OF OVER FOUR
THOUSAND PEOPLE. YOU HAVE 10 MINUTES TO RESPOND
OR BOTH EVENTS WILL HAPPEN.

I answered within the limit. I didn't need much time to consider. My eyes are gritty with fatigue and my ears strain to hear the distant roar of sirens. Sometimes I wonder if God is insane. Surely the burden of responsibility can do that to you. As I sit here I recall the events that have coloured my life, the happiness of younger days, the joys and memories of beautiful times now gone, and I thank God for the chance to have had them, grateful that someone – whoever had been deciding the fate before Frank – had shown mercy to me. Who knows what would have lain down those paths forever untaken?

Don't give me that face by Sarah Hilary

Keep off the grass, stick to the path, pick up your feet.
Don't dawdle.
No lights in the house after ten o'clock.
Curtains drawn; keep yourself to yourself.
Quiet; be quiet, none of your business.
Say nothing.
Not now. Keep out. Go away.
Your father's sleeping; mother needs her rest.
Stand up straight.
Don't give me that face.
Knock before entering, wait to be asked, this is not your room.
Stay away.
Not now! Get out!
That is not a toy.
A hammer is not a toy –
Sticks and stones, broken bones, words never hurt anyone.
Not a toy.
Hammer.
Don't give me that face.
Don't –
Clean up this mess.
Spick and span, put some elbow-grease into it.
Those hands are filthy, clothes are ruined.
Wash dark colours separately.
Use a nail-brush.
Leave things the way you found them.
Tell no one.
Go to your room.
Good girl.

The spirit level by Sarah Hilary

From overhead a skitter of chair legs says Morning more reliably than the clock he fixed to the wall.

He's redecorating the bathroom, orange. He has a hammer to break up the old tiles, working to a rhythm, swinging, bringing it down. She likes the pattern, pulse; a noise like living.

When he goes away she's frantic. For the children there's no change; they cannot understand her pacing, snapping fingers, counting the bricks from one end of the room to the other. The new line of orange tiles isn't even; he left the spirit level behind. She gets into the habit of placing it everywhere, along the door jamb, on the floor, across the tops of shelves.

She stands on tiptoe and holds it on the ends of her fingers, flush to the ceiling, watching its long eye empty and fill with green spirit, seesawing until it stops.

Nothing in the cellar is straight.

The children sit in front of the television, moon-faced, tongues worrying at the hollows in their teeth.

She worries the food will not last until he returns. She sets the spirit level on the lid of the chest freezer then places it inside, where ice has formed a scummy shelf. The green eye runs away, blinking, winking from the glacier polythene of pork chops.

She thinks, What if the floor isn't the floor but the ceiling? What if I'm living on my side?

She pushes her ear to the wall and fills her head with the thwapping of her blood.

One of the children tries to take the spirit level from her and she yells, clutching the thing to her breast as if it's the child, not the big-eyed rot-toothed beast grabbing at her.

The spirit is strange, a beautiful bubble shaped like a heart being squeezed, being swallowed and blown back out, bursting

back and forth, boiling, smoothing flat and low in the level. She could watch it for hours.

The idea of smashing it comes and goes, exciting her. At night she sleeps with it against her sternum, feeling her lungs inflate, deflate, chasing the spirit to and fro. She dreams she cracks the glass but the spirit keeps its shape, filling the cup of her hand, a fluorescent globe.

In the morning she thinks of falling on the level, like a Samurai. Of driving – hiding it – up inside her body. She would walk stiffly but always find her balance.

He comes back, bringing the sharp stink of outside, bitumen and burning leaves. Autumn, already?

He's brown, there's sand between his long toes, loose skin below his ribs, whole handfuls of it. He's old, she remembers, was old before she was born. Pouches under his eyes, presents for the children, garlands of plastic flowers.

She hated him for a long time, feared him for longer, but he comes back smelling of outside, bringing the familiar beat of his feet on the cellar floor, and she reaches for him with something like love.

Rosemary by Mark Howard Jones

She couldn't remember exactly when she'd first noticed him but she would never forget the first time their eyes had met.

It was accidental, on his part at least, but she'd been hypnotised by those dark, deep brown depths and hadn't been able to pull her gaze away. Finally he'd averted his eyes in slight embarrassment, which she found so sweet, as he stood up ready to leave the train. At the next stop she'd drifted off the train, too, coming down to earth with a hard bump when she ran into three of her colleagues at the entrance to their building. She'd started her new job in February and he may have been catching the same train that she did even back then, but if so it was weeks, maybe a month, before the crush of commuters had fortuitously manoeuvred them to within sight of each other. After that, he always seemed to be there. And she was so glad of that; he was a beautiful splash of colour at the start of days that were inevitably a heavy high-contrast monochrome.

Despite her desire to blurt out her wonderful discovery to her flatmates, Joanne and Ellie, to compare notes with them, she had kept silent. Ellie was fond of asking her why Ian didn't call any more and they'd both bray hideously whenever one of them made a crack about "frightening another one off". She could do without that, God knows. No, he was her perfect portrait of pleasure. And only she would look at him.

Once every week, on Fridays, he got on the train carrying a large bouquet of flowers. For months her curiosity had eaten away at her. She found herself sitting at her desk, not attending to her work at all. She would conjure up the image of the flowers he'd been carrying that morning; so colourful, so perfectly fresh and at the height of their bloom.

If only he would rise from his seat one morning, a perfect Friday, and walk over to where she sat and hand them to her; telling her that they had been for her all along but that he'd been too shy give to them to her on all those previous occasions. And that, all those other times, after she'd left the train he'd simply travelled to the next stop and pushed the bouquet, unappreciated, into the waste bin outside the station. But then Mrs Winters, the wizened old bag, would come over and demand to know where

this or that was, or how something or other else was coming along. And the dream would be pushed into the waste bin along with the flowers.

She didn't want to end up like that dried-up woman, sat in her mushroom-coloured office, becoming desiccated inch by inch. She just couldn't be like that. The first time she saw him she knew she loved him, wanted him. She imagined laying him back, naked, and mounting him as if he was more a beast than a man. She could see herself digging her nails into his firm chest, holding him there, daring him to move, while she rode him until they were sweating and exhausted, post-coital. But then he'd appeared that Friday with the flowers. And he had stayed on the train beyond his usual stop.

The bouquet in his hands transformed him in her mind into a different person, no longer just a handsome quarry, a potential fuck mate, now he revealed himself as someone else; someone capable of feeling, with an alluring softness of temperament that was uncommon. She was now not simply attracted to him, she was mesmerised by him.

When her stop came along and she'd had to get off, she couldn't stop wondering who the flowers were for, running through the possibilities in her mind.

Surely they were for his elderly mother. She'd deserve a fresh bouquet every week, wouldn't she? But how many men did she know who took their mothers flowers every single week? But then again, maybe he was the perfect son. That would fit, she thought. Or perhaps they were for the madame of some secret suburban brothel; maybe he enjoyed unsuspected semi-detached sex in the late mornings. No, he was too young and handsome for that. He'd never need a place like that. But maybe he had special tastes that the place catered to. No, no, no.

She pushed the thought to the back of her mind. He was too perfect for that, too deliciously handsome.

Worst of all was the thought that they were for his lover, his sweetheart, some lucky little bitch who got flowers and a fuck every Friday, regular as clockwork. She didn't know if this was true, but she could imagine her now; a neat girl with not a single spare pound of weight on her, pretty and petite. The sort of girl every man dreams about, the sort they all want in their arms and in their bed. God, she hated the very thought of her.

She spent the rest of that day in a deep, glum place from which nobody and nothing could rescue her. One evening, as she sat listening to the dulling banality of her flatmates' conversation, occasionally uttering a positive sounding noise to placate them, she decided she would find out about the man and his flowers. She would discover his secret. She wouldn't have to put up with her burning curiosity any longer because it would be satisfied.

Later that night, lying alone in her room, she masturbated in celebration; her orgasm, when it arrived, was more complete and more satisfying than any she could remember. The following day she went to Mrs Winters and tried to book the following Friday off. Her supervisor exuded frosty pleasure as she delivered the news that several other people were already on holiday that day, so she had to refuse the request.

Fighting back her sense of disappointment, she told herself that there was no reason to suppose that he would change his habits suddenly after all this time so instead booked a Friday off several weeks in advance.

Sure enough, every Friday until that day, he was on the train, flowers in hand, staying seated beyond both their usual stops. She tried not to look at him too often or in a different way but, now that her mind was made up, she felt closer to him than she had before. The Friday morning she'd chosen to follow him, she dressed conservatively in a dress and top, finishing off her outfit with a light overcoat. She was aiming to investigate not seduce, to become invisible if need be.

She arrived at the station far too early, a sign of her nervousness, and bought a newspaper, which she normally never did. She did her best to blend in with the commuter crowd while still avoiding anyone who might know her, any questioners or priors.

She shuffled on to the train with the other passengers and hung from a handrail, peering between the heads and shoulders to find him. When she saw him, she felt an odd tingle cross her shoulders and her breast bone. The day was bright but cool and he was wearing dark glasses which made him look even more handsome. With the added air of mystery they gave him she imagined him acting out a part in a French New Wave film from the 60s.

The more she looked at him, in discreet glances with the occasional sidelong stare, the more convinced she became that he would fit so very nicely in her bed; the perfect body to wake next to, to run her hands over, dig her nails into, kiss and caress.

She was briefly distracted by a knot of schoolgirls who got on at the next stop. They only stayed until the subsequent station but seeing them made her nostalgic for school, which now seemed so long ago. But then she remembered the bitter little bitches and the loneliness she'd had to sit through and soon shook the feeling off.

Finally the commuters had all left the train and it headed out of the city. She no longer had to stand. There were now only a handful of passengers and she took a seat near to him but just far enough away. She could smell his aftershave. "Wonderful, of course," she thought. Self consciously, she popped a mint into her mouth.

Now nothing could distract her from her mission. Not even the annoying insectoid ticking and tishing issuing from the earphones of the slouched boy across the aisle from her. Not even the choking toilet-cleaner perfume of the girl two seats in front. Normally these things would have ground away at her nerves, making her itch inside, ready to lash out unfairly at the first person who crossed her path and was unwise enough to open their mouths. But not today; she was in a bubble, a cocoon where only he existed and where his secret would be revealed to her and protected, for her alone.

House after house and garden after garden passed as the train headed towards the end of its journey. They'd been travelling for nearly an hour and she was beginning to wonder exactly where they'd end up. There were only a few small places this far out of the city. What could there be for him out here? The image of a secret suburban vice den catering to grotesque male lusts forced itself back into her mind before being buried deep under several layers of denial.

When he finally did get off the train, at a tiny dormitory town that had a reputation for lethargy and dullness, she followed him along respectably tedious streets until the houses began to thin out and finally disappeared altogether.

She became nervous and dropped back slightly, not wanting to risk him turning around and seeing her. There was no-one else around, no pedestrians and only the occasional car. She was sure he'd recognise her from the train and she wasn't after any sort of confrontation.

The railway track ran to one side of the road, leading to the next town on the line, while on the other was a stone wall with the occasional

overhanging tree. She peered ahead and past him, to see if any likely destination appeared.

They'd been walking for nearly 15 minutes when he suddenly stopped and looked, too cautiously, in both directions before crossing the road. She looked down and pretended to search for something in her bag, moving her possessions around pointlessly, just like she'd seen in all those movies.

When she looked up he was across the road, about to disappear into a concealed entrance overhung with foliage. Not wanting to lose him, she risked running ahead to catch him up.

Two large iron gates came into view and a metal sign bolted to the wall. Fairview Fields Cemetery. She caught her breath and almost laughed out loud with relief. Her rival was no rival at all; just a deceased relative, maybe one of his parents. Her mood lightened as she realised that the flowers weren't intended for the living.

In the next moment she realised that now she was here, with him, she had no idea what to do next. Should she dash back to the station and hope there was a return train before the one he intended to catch? Or should she wait and follow him, intending to catch a later train?

Maybe he had another errand to run after visiting the cemetery.

She decided to stay and followed him slowly, discreetly to the location of the grave, making sure to put a wide row of grave markers between them.

He arrived at a plain grey stone in the centre of a row just back off the path. It was in the new section of the cemetery.

She was shocked to see him almost double over suddenly as he reached to remove the previous offering of flowers, barely wilted in the seven days since they'd been laid there. He reached out to steady himself on the gravestone, tugging off his dark glasses with the other hand. Huge tears fell from his eyes onto the fresh flowers he'd bought and, thinking himself alone, he let deep sobs rack his body. It was the first time she'd heard his voice; the sound of an open wound.

She wanted to rush forward and hold him close, to dry his tears, tell him everything would be fine, that she was there, that she would help him to forget. She would mutter the empty nonsense people always did to the grief-stricken, but with genuine feeling. For several seconds she struggled against herself.

After a few minutes he recovered himself, dried his eyes with a white cotton handkerchief, and began unwrapping and arranging the flowers he'd bought, removing the older blooms from the grave pot to make way for them. The grave must hold a close relative to demand this much devotion and grief, she thought. Ashamed, she knew that had to find out exactly who was buried there.

Treading very carefully she crept forward until she was just close enough to make out the writing on the stone if she squinted hard. She was frustrated by his kneeling in front of the grave, obscuring the lettering. She held her breath and waited for him to move.

When he did she could just make out the first name 'Rosemary'. Then a few moments later the numbers on the grave marker, the final date, the end of a life.

With a start she realised the grave's occupant had been 26. Just 26. And he'd been coming here every week for over five years. Now she felt cold all over and inside, too. "He's never going to love me," she thought. "Never. He's still in love with her."

She smoothed down her skirt, coughed quietly so that he wouldn't hear her and turned towards the gates of the cemetery. "Even the dead get more love than I do," she thought.

Young Woman, Menaced by Spider by Jamie Rosen

As the only daughter of a pair of globe-trotting archaeologists-cum-adventurers, Umbilica Muffet had grown accustomed to a variety of exotic threats and experiences in the eight years since her birth. But this was something else entirely.

The thing was a good two feet across, including its legs, and hairy in a most unseemly way. Its multifaceted eyes sparkled crimson in the torchlight that illuminated the cave, and Umbilica could see only one thing lurking behind them -conscienceless, hungering evil. This beast, she knew, would eat her slowly, binding her with its silk and sucking the juices from her body over the course of several days.

But only if it got the chance.

Umbilica was on the spider in an instant, the blade of her carefully concealed dagger flashing in the light as it plunged into the creatures body, stuck halfway, then slipped sideways with a jerk and wound up buried to the hilt. For all its intimidating appearance, the oversized arachnid didn't put up much of a fight, and soon (too soon, in Umbilica's view) it lay motionless at her feet. She licked the ichor off the flat of the blade and nodded, a hint of a smile coming over her face as she recognized the aftertaste.

Somewhere nearby there was a nest of eggs; either they had just hatched, or they were just about to. Either way, Umbilica knew that if she acted fast she would be able to catch and train one for her own use - and that, soon afterward, there would be no more bedtimes, no more asparagus, and definitely no more homework.

Tequila Mockingbird by John Travis

Why you need less sleep as you get older instead of more I've never understood; one of God's little jokes I expect; heaven knows he has plenty of them. As a result I'm usually up and about by five thirty; in the winter everything's black as pitch; summer and you can see up and down the length of the street. And for the past few days I'd had my eye on one house in particular.

It'd been a sticky breathless night, and would turn into a baking hot afternoon. I sat there on my porch at quarter past six, watching the world slowly open its eyes as the birds sang, perched on their little tables as they always were, hopping around, taking food from each other's beaks.

But birds tended not to bother with 'Cilla Abcott; they knew which houses had cats and which didn't. And even if Cordelia was knocking on a bit (by my reckoning she's the sixth generation of Cordelia's in that house), she could still catch the young 'Uns off guard.

There was this one bird though that didn't bother about any cat. It sat patiently on Prescilla Abcott's lawn for most of the day, as though waiting for something. Once in a while 'Cilla's shroud-like net curtains would rearrange themselves.

One morning I thought it was a goner. It was hopping about and Cordelia came out. My heart leapt into my throat. It doesn't matter how many times I see a cat catch something, it still pains me. I was frozen to the spot; something like that always seems to hypnotise me. I needn't have worried – I watched in disbelief as the cat walked straight past that bird and they casually glanced at each other like a couple of swells saying Hi to each other in the park. The bird looked away then buried its head back in the soil.

Then around noon 'Cilla would come out and tip some bits off her pinny onto her lawn, go back inside, and peer round the

side of her nets watching the bird with a queer look on her face, like someone who's had something good happen to them but they don't know how to react to it. The bird would hang about most of the day, occasionally flapping off for a while. But whenever I looked out it was usually there, peering in at that shabby front window.

‘Cilla Abcott was a strange one, no doubt about that. She shunned people and they shunned her and it’d been the same ever since I could remember. Over sixty-five years we’d lived across from each other and not spoken since we were girls. She got a lot of stick for being different in those days, and things never really changed.

That morning though the bird wasn’t the first to appear.

‘Cilla Abcott was instead.

Out she came, glancing this way and that like some Shakespearean villain, shoulders all hunched up, wearing a long black dress and wrinkled tights (in this weather!), her face screwed up against the sun. She had something in her hand, and was walking down the yard.

When she got out to her garden she looked around again, like a young child should before crossing a busy road (they soon stop that after a while) and stooped and put whatever-it-was down on the gravel. From this distance it looked like a bottle. I’ll bet I screwed my face up too. The old coot had stuck a straw in the top of the bottle.

With a husband gone and children scattered all over the place there’s nothing much else to do in a small town but wonder. I certainly did that. After a while though I got angry with myself. I always sat there on a morning in the summer so that was no different; staring into someone’s garden though... had I nothing better to do? Is this what my days amounted to, watching silly old women leaving bottles in their gardens? I decided it was not; my yard needed tidying up. I went round back, got the broom and started to clean the place up a bit.

Maybe half an hour later I heard shouting. It was still early remember, and at that time of day you sneeze too loud and half the neighbourhood hear it. But there were two voices, shouting. Leaving the broom propped against the side of the house I made my way to the front. I thought I recognised one of the voices. Rounding the corner, I saw I was right.

Standing beneath the branches of a tree was the heavy bulk and beet-red face of Henry Dwight. If there’s ever any noise in the area, look no further. That man could cause a riot in a boneyard. He stood looking up at the branches, shaking his fist comically. He looked about ready to pop.

“Hey!” I shouted as I made my way over to him. “What’s all the noise about?”

Dwight opened and closed his mouth a few times.

“That, that-“ he pointed a shaky finger up into the leafy branches. “That damned bird called me an asshole!”

His language didn’t shock me. Some men think you swear in front of a woman and you gotta apologise else they faint or something. Well, I can swear with the best of them.

“Who did?” I asked.

“That goddamned bird!” He said, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth.

Looking up through the greenery I could see the bird. I know all birds probably look the same to those of us with untrained eyes, but I was sure I recognised this one.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” I told Dwight. “It’s sat there minding its own business.”

He glared down at me, impatient to speak. He hadn’t been listening. “Do you know what it did?” He said, his neck muscles bulging. “I was walking along, minding my own business, and there’s a bottle in the Witch’s garden.” He lowered his voice slightly. When we’d been kids there’d been this story that ‘Cilla could take the lids off trashcans by ‘thinking’ them off. The story, as stories sometimes did, stuck. “And there’s only a goddamned straw in the top! A damned blue and white striped straw.” I’d been right after all – my eyes weren’t deceiving me. And there’s that bird, waddling around the bottle, like it was doing an inspection. I was wondering why when I saw the worm in the bottom and realised – it’s a bottle of tequila, it’s after the worm. So I stood and watched for a minute. Then, suddenly, it looks up and sees the straw floating about in the top.

“And no word of a lie Ellen, it pecked at the straw, and started to drink the tequila! Honest to God! You go over and look at that bottle, there’s a good two fingers gone from it!” Dwight glanced back at the bird, which had its head on one side, listening.

“I started to laugh at it – it was comical. Then it let go of the straw and fell back against the pavement, staggered a bit, then noticed me. It waddled forward a few steps, and I’ll swear it on anything you like Ellen.” He stopped to catch his breath – “- it looked at me all cocked-eyed and said “What’s the matter with you, asshole? You want some?””

He stared at me, waiting for sympathy as I shook my head. Dwight’s a well-known boozier and, sure enough, his breath smelled of mints as usual.

“Henry Dwight,” I said, as though to a kid. “Do you realise how that sounds -”

“It’s true enough, lady!” Said a voice from above.

Well, I thought my time had come. Dwight had to catch me before I fell. He wasn’t too steady either. We looked up at that tree as if the Lord himself were perched in it. After a few minutes I got my composure. “Best just to leave it Henry,” I whispered. “Come on, it must be the tequila or something.”

After a few minutes I persuaded him to move away. We got about six paces down the road and the bird hopped onto a lower branch to watch. “Hey, fatso! Hey, I’m talking to you! You listening fat man, huh?”

There was something in that bird’s voice at that moment that took me right back to being about nine years old. The voice was kind of comically childish, naive, mischievous...like someone who hasn’t mixed with the wide world and never properly matured... Something raced across my mind and then I started to think about trashcans...

I was disturbed from my thoughts by Dwight’s yelling.

“Ellen, Ellen! Look!”

I looked. Unbeknown to me the bird had fled the tree and was now in ‘Cilla’s garden. It waddled uncertainly up to the bottle and pinged its beak against the glass. I could just make out the shrivelled little thing at the bottom of the bottle. It hadn’t moved any nearer the top.

So, just as Henry Dwight said he’d seen, that bird went and grasped the straw between its beak (standing at ‘Cilla’s wall I noticed it was candy-striped, like a children’s party straw), and took three big – and I mean big – slugs from the bottle. You could hear it glugging it down. By the time it had finished more than a quart of that bottle had gone. By rights that bird should’ve been dead.

A sudden movement caught my eye. I was sure I saw those wraith-like nets of ‘Cilla’s wavering about slightly. They were absolutely filthy, too – the muck was probably holding them together. But the room behind the nets was so dark that you couldn’t tell if anyone was standing there or not.

There was a belch from the pavement. The bird was really in its cups now, staggering about like some clown in a silent film. It let forth a torrent of abuse, most of which I can’t remember. But it got Dwight even more

steamed up, and a couple of others in the street came out to see who was cursing at such an ungodly hour.

“Heavens above!” Someone sounding like Alice Dorchester exclaimed behind me. “I haven’t heard language like that since- what the hell is that bird doin’?”

Me, Dwight and a few others watched as the bird started to fly. It weaved and spun, twisted and corkscrewed like some kamikaze pilot. It dive-bombed us four or five times, and we all ducked in unison as the bird cackled overhead. “You small-minded sons of bitches! I hope you rot in hell!”

It soon got bored of this as we knew to duck in time. It flew as quick as a flash over to the other side of the street and rummaged about in one of the garden’s there, then hopped onto a wall, watching us. We watched back. It was like something from a western. For a few seconds there was absolute quiet.

Suddenly it seemed to take a sharp intake of breath and flew towards us at high speed; only this time it didn’t dive. As it got near you could see something in the back of its throat, its eyes glistened, and it spat – didn’t drop, spat – a mouthful of gravel chippings right onto us, flew back to the garden, reloaded and did the same again, three times in all. Nobody got hurt any worse than a few scratches, except Alice Dorchester who lost a few locks when it crash-landed her bouffant, yanking out a few hairs at the root on the last of its attacks.

“You sorry bunch of losers!” The bird screeched at us from a safe distance. “All so God-damn high and mighty with your nice homes and fancy cars, all clean and spotless.” It burped again, sounding more like a bullfrog than a bird. “Well, clean this! Ahahahahaha!”

And it went past every car that was out in the street and did its business on all of ‘em. Of course, that’s not a lot of business, not like a horse or nothin’, but when you consider there must’ve been more than ten cars out that day, and this was your average sized mockingbird... Well, it must’ve been storing it up special is all I can say. It was unnatural.

Dwight snapped then, went crazy. His wife was telling me before about his high blood pressure and how the doctor warned him to take it easy – at that moment it looked as though Henry was going to erupt like a volcano, he was practically purple. After he’d fired off a few curses of his own,

Louisa must've heard him and came running out in nightgown and fluffy pink slippers. Given the circumstances, nobody batted an eyelid.

"Henry I heard you shouting, what's going on?" She said.

"Fat man! Hey fatso, wanna drink?"

Dwight stared at the bird as though his eyes would roll out of their sockets.

"Bars ain't open yet, but there's a bottle here--"

"Why you little--"

And Dwight charged at the bird. He only got so far because it flew at him and squawked and shrieked and hollered and flapped like a demon. Henry squealed like a stuck pig, shielding his eyes with his hands, backing off all the while. Once he was out of the way the bird went back to the bottle and took another swig. It was starting to bloat terribly. The bottle was nearly half empty.

Louisa let out a shriek. "My God, look what it's done to you!" She said.

It had certainly made a mess. Nothing permanent, but ugly nonetheless. Good job he wasn't entering any beauty pageants. His face and neck were covered in a series of little red criss-crosses, like cuts from a razor. Louisa put her arm around him (as far as she could) and led him away home. The bird shrieked its approval.

"Bye, asshole! Be seein' ya!" It shrilled, its beak snapping open and shut like a scissors.

The bird decided it hadn't finished. I suppose I was hoping that it was just Dwight that had rattled it and once he was out of the way it would get bored and go. But it didn't. Instead it started to peck at car windows and house doors, marking them with spit and scratches and dirty footprints, all the while calling us all every name under the sun. When it wasn't getting any reaction it would pick up some more gravel and spit at us, or dive at us again.

How long this lasted I don't know. But Dwight emerged after a while covered in little bits of tissue paper. Louisa was still in her nightwear.

"Hey, nice outfit!" The bird squawked "Those pink slippers are really cute!"

We all looked towards Louisa as if seeing her for the first time. Nobody looked particularly shocked at her dress, but she blushed and

dashed back inside, more than once losing a slipper and having to go back for it.

“That damn bird is always in the witch’s garden. I reckon she’s something to do with all this,” Dwight said stupidly, trying to fill the embarrassed silence.

And she’d spent all those years alone in that house brooding, putting up with the taunts and whispers...

“Well I don’t know about anyone else,” Dwight announced, rubbing his stomach. “I’m gonna get that bottle. Get rid of the bottle, get rid of the bird.” We murmured agreement. It sounded reasonable enough.

So Dwight marched forward, trying to look as macho as can be, and for a big guy with a paunch, not doing too badly – until the bird figured out what was happening and flew at him again.

“You leave my goddamned bottle alone you fat piece of shit!” The bird yelled (and I mean yelled) amid a frenzied blur of flapping wings and needle-sharp claws. Dwight managed another two steps before backing out, the bird keeping it up until he was almost back alongside us again – just so he’d got the message, I suppose.

We all looked at Dwight then. He stood there re-arranging his shirt and hair, little bits of white paper stuck to his face like dried spitballs. A more ridiculous sigh you could not wish to see. He had an indignant look in his eyes which said If you think I’m gonna be beaten by some stupid bird then think again.

Taking a deep breath, he rubbed his hands on his shirt. “Okay,” he said with a kind of sigh. “Okay...if that’s what has to be done, then so be it.” He marched away from us sharply, leaving us all staring at each other. He was half way down his drive when it struck me what he was going for.

Once inside his house Louisa started shouting and then Dwight yelled back at her: “You ain’t gonna stop me, Lou. I’ve been humiliated in my own street!”

He came out of his front door brandishing his shotgun. We all drew in sharp breaths as we saw the thing draped over his arm like a mink. I could feel my heart pounding, my breaths shortening. This was getting way out of hand. Maybe ‘Cilla would see how silly this was all getting and stop.

“What the hell is going on here? Henry Dwight, what do you think you’re gonna do with that gun?”

We all looked around. When I saw Roberta bustling up the street in her usual busy manner I could've kissed her.

'Cilla hardly got any visitors. Well, she only got the one – Roberta. Over the past fifteen years or so 'Cilla Abcott has had many home helpers and managed to drive away every single one; that was up until about five years ago when Roberta Freeman said she wanted to see this old woman who was causing so much trouble (there was a story that a couple of the helpers had fled from the house in tears) and that she'd be able to sort her out. Nobody believed her of course, but, try as she might (and according to Roberta she really did try), 'Cilla couldn't do anything bad enough to get rid of her. Nowadays Roberta said that "Cilla tolerated her, and I suspect had a grudging admiration for her for staying around so long.

"I asked you a question, Dwight. What are doing with that gun?"

Dwight was speechless. Roberta, when she put her mind to it, could cut anyone down in their prime, Henry Dwight included. I suppose dealing with 'Cilla toughened you up some. But she was never other than friendly with those who treated her right.

Dwight blustered. "That damned bird called me an asshole!" He spat out.

"Well I'd say that bird is a mighty fine judge of character," she answered. "Now, what's going on?" Only Roberta Freeman would have the nerve to say that to a man who was pointing a loaded gun at her.

So we all chipped in and told her bits and pieces until the story was complete. Halfway through, a sly smile started to play across her face. I've never seen such a knowing look. So that's what the old devil's been up to, is how I read it.

"Well something's triggered it all off," she said when we'd finished. "I know 'Cilla pretty well and she wouldn't do something like that without reason. So -" She looked at each of us in turn, "-who's upset her lately?"

We all mumbled and looked at each other.

"Dwight...?" Roberta said.

"Okay, okay. I may have upset her last week, but she brought it on herself!"

Roberta stood, arms folded. "What did you do, Dwight?" She said quietly.

Apparently one day he'd been walking past her garden and looked in at it. He'd stood there awhile, tutting at the mess. 'Cilla had showed at the window and signalled for him to move away.

"I told her if she was such a good witch she should put a spell on me and make me leave," Dwight told us. "I had a piece of gum in my mouth and spat it into her garden." Roberta shook her head. "But that was nothing compared to what she's doing now!" He added quickly, pointing at his face.

"Oh, it's not just that, you idiot!" Roberta snapped back. "She's had this all her life, all because of some stupid rumour when she was a girl. You've never given her a chance. I know she's an old devil, but she's like that because people round here have made her that way."

That touched a nerve. Heads hung down. Dwight had been the straw that broke the camel's back. There was awkward silence for a few minutes.

"Okay, okay." Roberta said. "I'll put a stop to it for you. But you've all got to promise – you as well Dwight – that you'll never torment or annoy her again and just leave her be. And you've all to pass the word around too."

We all agreed.

"Okay then. I'll go now."

Dwight wasn't finished yet. "Hang on a minute. How do we know you'll have sorted her out?"

"I'll take one of you with me – not you Dwight, she hates your guts – you Ellen, you're a sensible type."

"Me?" I said, suddenly getting all jittery like a child in a ghost train.

"Yes, you. You'll be perfectly safe with me in there."

With an eye on Roberta and one eye on the bird I made my way into 'Cilla's garden. Roberta bent down and grabbed the bottle by the neck, its contents sloshing around the sides. I tensed, waiting for the bird to attack.

But it didn't; although it looked like it wanted to – it stared down from a tree in the garden, jerking about like a dog on a leash. Roberta's face had a look of sheer concentration on it. "She never locks her door so we can go straight in," she said over her shoulder. No, I thought, she doesn't need to. We stepped inside quickly. Roberta slammed it shut with a sigh of relief.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. There was a wild banging on the door and flapping of wings which sounded much bigger than they were. Roberta

even fastened a few chains in place. Later on people said the bird damned near killed itself bashing that door to get at us.

I was dumbstruck by the noise behind me. In front of me dust motes swirled around, an old faded black and white portrait picture sat crookedly in its frame above the light switch.

“Come on,” Roberta said.

We went down the hall and turned right at the top into the living room. It smelled like the inside of a musty wardrobe.

I’d heard that ‘Cilla didn’t allow Roberta to do any cleaning, but even so... Everywhere seemed to have a thin film of dust on it. The wallpaper was stained grey and yellow, the nets looked as though they’d had years of cigar smoke blown on them. As for furnishings in the room, it was all pretty sparse and old fashioned; I saw a table just like we’d had when I was a girl, full of fancy designs and scratches, a moth-eaten light shade with a slender stem underneath it. On a coffee table were three or four days’ worth of newspapers curling down towards the filthy carpet.

And stood in front of one of the heavy curtains was Priscilla Abcott.

It was the first proper look I’d had at her in years, and I didn’t like what I saw; there was only a few years between us both, but looking at her made me feel young. The skin on her face hung and creased like pieces of well-battered leather; she had no teeth in, and when she breathed in it was like looking at a balloon a few days after Christmas, shrivelling like a prune. She was almost a living skeleton, her eyes were sunk right back into her head, hidden in the room’s murk. Later on I’d see they were a large baby blue, like a newborn kitten. Her clothes hung off her like they didn’t want to be there at all.

“What the hell are you doin’ in my house?” She demanded. My heart raced a bit quicker. I could smell tequila in the air.

“You know damned well,” Roberta answered her. “You been acting strange for days and I wondered what you were up to.”

“You’ve no idea what I have to put up with round here!” The old lady spat back.

“Yes I do.” Roberta answered her, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Hey!” “Cilla looked down at Roberta’s hand. “What are you doing with that? Give it here!”

She shuffled forward at quite a speed, thin arms grasping out for the bottle. Roberta moved away from her, towards a back room. "Ellen," she said. I followed.

We were in the kitchen, a room even more dismal than the living room. The sides of the taps were clogged with dew, a burnt pan sat at an angle on the stove.

"Hey, you leave that goddamned bottle alone!"

Roberta had removed the straw and started emptying out the tequila. It glugged away down the filthy stained sink, which in turn gurgled back at her. 'Cilla was just about to grab the bottle when she stopped mid-action and stared straight ahead. "Oh no," she said in a quiet voice, on her face a look of defeat and regret.

"You knew that'd happen," Roberta said to her. I'd no idea what she was talking about. "It's a sin as well. I hope you're happy."

I was just about to ask what was going on when 'Cilla screeched again, making a grab for the bottle. As she did the worm unstuck from the bottom and slid its way out of the bottle, landing with a soft plop in the sink.

"Now, 'Cilla," Roberta said in a stern voice. "You just watch this. Watch and learn."

The revolting little thing in the sink started to wriggle itself about, looking like a giant caterpillar, both ends turned up at us like a smile without a face. I don't know who was more shocked, me or 'Cilla. I think we both backed away a little.

"Watch and learn," repeated Roberta.

The worm wriggled a bit more, but one end fell back into the sink. The other was still in the air, pointing to us. Then it spoke.

"Now you listen to me, Priscilla Abcott," it said in a garbled high-pitched whine of a voice like it had been sucking on a helium balloon. "You're not the only one around here with talents, you know. And I think it's high time you learned to live with it. If you'd tried a bit more instead of sulking all the time maybe people would've given you a chance in the end. You think about that. You know how long you've got left."

As this was going on I saw Roberta's lips moving silently. She was staring down at the worm with that same look of concentration on her face as I'd seen outside when we were coming in. My shock seemed to be nothing compared to Priscilla Abcott's. She wailed and wailed like a siren, it was

like a gale going through a museum. When she stopped she looked as though she was about to collapse. Roberta and me grabbed an arm each and led her to her rocking chair in the corner and sat her down. I stared at 'Cilla then. I couldn't believe the change in her. She was in shock, rocking back and forth slightly, lips trembling. Roberta gently tugged my arm. "Let's go," she said, "I'll be in tomorrow, 'Cilla," she said over her shoulder, but I doubt 'Cilla heard her. Before taking the chains off the door, Roberta said: "Apart from my folks no-one knows about – that," she said, avoiding my gaze. "I'd rather it was kept that way, Ellen, if you don't mind."

"Sure." I replied.

"That's how I put up with her," she said, undoing the chains. "I know exactly what it feels like."

"But you never told her."

"No. In the end I found that I couldn't. Silly huh?" She smiled a humourless smile. "Come on, our public awaits." She opened the door. I looked down at the step. On the worn mat was the body of the mockingbird, bloated and feathers ruffled, head bent out of shape, quite dead. Roberta spotted it. "It's a sin, you know," she said, shaking her head. "A damned sin."

On leaving the garden, what seemed like half the neighbourhood rushed forward to ask us what had happened.

In the days that followed there was lots of talk – but not by me or Roberta. It was soon becoming the stuff of local legend, bits getting added here and there. The people who heard that shriek said it would stay with them for as long as they lived. A few asked if there was another shriek in there – perhaps by me or Roberta. We never heard anything, we told them. It did work, though – 'Cilla was left pretty much alone after that. Nobody's been over there with a cake or anything like that, but at least she's not being pestered anymore. Even the neighbourhood kids seem to leave her alone now. What was the significance of the bird? Who can say? Perhaps it was the worst thing her childish mind could think of. But it served its purpose, that's for sure. I could say "who knows how their minds work at that age", but that could as easily apply to me.

Yesterday I was walking past her house and looked over at the garden. In among all the earth and patches of dying grass I saw a small

wooden cross made of two lollipop sticks jutting out of the soil near the window. The wind had blown it off to one side. There was some kind of inscription on the sticks in black felt pen but it was too small to make out.

You think about death a lot at my age. You have to. And I reckon 'Cilla won't be far behind that bird.

Alison, Alone by John Forth

It was five o'clock. Finally.

The metal chatter of the office, constant since the end of lunch, stuttered to a halt as each of the half dozen women in the cramped, brown-hued space withdrew their fingers from their typewriter keys and sat back. The moans and groans of wood and muscle filled the momentary silence. One by one the women started to rise up, stiff, reaching for their jackets and their bags, glad to see another day done. Grumbling to themselves and to each other, they shuffled to the door, still flexing their backs and shoulders as if to shake off the shackles of employment, and then they were gone. All except one, that is, who remained sitting at her desk, peering out of the nearest window, wondering where the world had gone.

Her name was Alison, too young to share conversations with the other women about their grandchildren, too old for them to equate her with their daughters. Instead, Alison occupied an invisible middle-ground between the two, relegated to a desk in the rear corner. She was forever on the outskirts of the conversation, left alone to her own devices.

At least she had the window. It looked out over the town centre street; high enough for her to occasionally exchange a shy smile with the top deck of the buses which whined and shuddered outside. In the six months she had been working in the office, she had come to recognise the regular visitors to the shops across the way, and even some of the commuters who were driven by her window. Some of them she had given names, and when they first appeared each day she would mutter - too quiet for the other women to hear - a little greeting to them. From time to time, Alison fancied that they'd stop and cock their heads to one side as if they had somehow heard her, but she knew that was only her imagination. They were as aware of her as she was of the dust in the air.

Today, however, even the small pleasures the window afforded Alison had been snatched away. A white mist, heavy and persistent, was already hanging above the street when she arrived at work, and throughout the course of the day it had descended until the view from her window was as indistinct as a pencil drawing that had been hastily erased. The building on the other

side of the road was little more than a faint outline, the people going back and forth were grey blurs. When the bus came alongside the office window, Alison could barely recognise any of the occupants' features, although once she thought she saw a smeared thumbprint of a face turn in her direction before being ushered off.

The thought of going out into the street while it was still under such heavy cover did not appeal to Alison, but nor did staying in the cold and drab office any longer. With a sigh, she pushed her softening body up from the chair and pulled her cardigan tight across her broad shoulders. As she took her long coat from the hanger by the door, she thought briefly of her younger, skinnier, days and the ambitions she'd had - a ballerina, an actress, a gymnast. A small, sad laugh escaped her as she imagined what that girl would think of her current situation.

The unpainted stone stairwell was empty, and the other offices which she passed on her way to the ground floor were unoccupied. As she reached the small lobby, Alison could already see faint tendrils of mist in the air, reaching in to encourage her on to the street. Beyond the glass panels in the main door, everything was white, and she wondered if she might just fall into nothingness as soon as she stepped outside. Only the feel of solid concrete under her feet convinced her otherwise.

There was no wind, but the mist carried with it a touch of ice. Alison started along the street, avoiding the smoky figures which formed out of the haze before passing by. The cars were sea creatures shifting just below the surface of the water. At every turning she stopped, tracing the lines of the road to the point at which they disappeared, conjuring up the courage to walk on. When she reached the main door of her block of flats, she almost expected her hand to pass through the handle, the entire facade dissolving into smoke. But no, it was as solid and real as ever. Alison trudged inside and made her way up the stairs. The lift was broken so regularly that it was hardly worth checking anymore.

Even from the ninth floor, the mist remained thick and motionless, the lights below only just managing to penetrate its deep gloom. To distract herself, Alison made a simple dinner and sat down on her sofa to watch the small black and white television in the corner. The reception was so poor that the characters on the box appeared to be fighting through the same fog that had fallen over the town. Eventually, it became so unwatchable she

switched the TV off. She didn't care for the stories it told anyway. Mostly they were too brutish for her tastes, too overt. She preferred simpler tales, where the good and the bad were more clearly delineated, and morals were always upheld at the end, no matter the cost.

As always when she was in that kind of mood, Alison turned to the cheap wooden bookshelf by the gas fire. The thick spines of the volumes housed there were in various states of wear and tear, but the titles - even where faded - remained clear: Friends Forever. There were over a dozen of them, spanning over two decades from the earliest - her mother's 1931 annual - up to the bumper 1955 edition, which Alison had received for her sixteenth birthday. As her finger reached the end of the shelf, she allowed it to rest in the date stamped into the stitched fabric of this last volume. Almost twenty-five years ago...

The books had been prized possessions throughout her childhood and adolescence. Indeed, when Alison thought back to her youth, she more often than not found her mind playing scenes from her favourite stories as opposed to actual memories. At random, she gently slid the 1937 volume from the shelf and looked through the brittle pages. Amidst tight text detailing everything from recipes to historical biographies to dynamic tales of loss and thwarted love, were two-colour illustrations of girls at play and at work, clean pen-and-ink lines depicting a style of life that Alison wasn't sure had ever existed. These girls lived in a parentless world of exploration, where every beach or wood became an adventure playground, where every challenge could be defeated before teatime. Both prim and wide-eyed, these girls seemed capable of achieving anything, their youth a weapon with which to face to the future, optimism their ammunition. There would be no office job for them, no lonely chair in the corner from which they would watch the world walk by without them.

Alison put the book back and reached for another. The volume she chose was from the post-war period, by which time the format of Friends Forever had moved more towards sequential comic strips than articles and prose. The stories from here on tended to the melodramatic - tales of disabled dancers and war orphans, of brutal stepmothers and denied fortunes - but if anything, these were Alison's favourites. The miseries heaped on the heroines of the later stories were almost operatic in their grandeur. Workhouse Girls of Woking, Petra and the Paralysed Pony, Don't Stop Me

From Dancing, the titles told the stories almost without further explanation. Indeed, they mostly told the same one - that of a young girl battling against overwhelming adversity to attain her goal, or realise her dream; and who couldn't relate to that? After all, didn't adolescence seem at the time to consist of an endless series of people standing in the way of what Alison wanted to do? Just skimming the stories, she couldn't help but feel envious of the headstrong girls populating those pages. Despite frequent defeat, they never gave up, and never compromised their ideals. Alison wished that she had been so strong. When her parents had insisted that she stop dreaming and go out to work, she capitulated; when she'd declared that she wanted to follow George, her young Corporal sweetheart, on his overseas posting, they'd shouted her down. There was never a situation where Alison had fought hard for what she wanted, and now look at her - alone in her council flat, sharing a workplace with granite-faced old women who didn't even acknowledge that she existed.

She relaxed on the sofa with her favourite stories, willing each girl on against the world despite knowing how their stories would end. Outside, the world was as blank as the gutters between the comic strip panels. Later, the fog began to creep in to the edge of Alison's vision, and she put the annual to one side. In bed that night, she dreamt of being young and lithe of limb, of dancing before an audience of downturned theatre masks, of maintaining dignity and integrity against all odds. She was a battling orphan, a strong-willed worker, a teenage cat burglar; she was everything she wanted to be until the morning came and the sun pushed through the lingering mist to wake her up, then she was nothing.

The next day was a Saturday. Tired of the same streets - the same walls - Alison caught the train a few stops along the line. She took with her a favourite volume of Friends Forever in a small cloth bag, intending to find a bench by the river where she could spend a restful afternoon allowing the simple illustrations to send her imagination tumbling through scenes from an imaginary childhood. But the miasma from the previous day had followed her, settling between the banks and turning the water to smoke. It was impossible to read. Instead, she walked along the high street until she found the churchyard, where she wandered amongst the stones, her eyes drawing ghosts in the fog. "What do you think, girls?" She muttered to herself,

looking at the faded inscription on an old gravestone. "Is it a code?" The mist curled around her. "You're right, we should investigate..." Her voice trailed off. "We should..."

The soft outline of a row of cottages lay on the far side of the churchyard, the dark jagged halo of the trees behind hanging over them. Walking alongside rough drafts of the cottage gardens, she thought of four girls living side by side in these little storybook homes, friends since birth. They would be called Amy, and Angela, and Alicia, and Alison, and maybe they would have a dog. Inseparable, they would uncover the mysteries of the town, both old and new, then return home for biscuits and lemonade. They lived in a world where parental guidance was unnecessary, and boys were a mere inconvenience. Alison clutched the book in her bag close to her side. Yes, that would have been the right sort of life to have. But she had waited too long.

The old cottage at the end of the row came in to view as if hastily drawn in, a few obscure scribbles at first, forming into a rickety old stone building which appeared to have slumped in on itself. Alison thought that it was strange to have a single, unoccupied home at the end of such a pretty row, and cast her eyes back to the other houses. Only then did she notice that their windows lacked curtains, and that what she could see of the rooms beyond appeared unfurnished. All of the cottages were empty, apart from the broken down structure that she was approaching.

The man in the garden was immobile to the point that Alison initially mistook him for a large sculpture, forgotten amidst the overgrown tangle of the surrounding shrubs and bushes. Perhaps it was the thick grey moss-like hair, or the wood grain lines that marked his face that made him look like he would be more at home in a children's book, cast as a forest sage. Certainly when he turned his head and gave Alison the sort of slight, sad smile usually saved for old friends gone to seed, she couldn't help but feel embarrassed at having disturbed whatever long contemplation he'd been involved in.

Alison bowed her head and words fell over themselves to escape from her mouth. "I'm really very sorry to disturb you," she said. "I didn't notice you were there."

"Not at all." The man's voice was calm as a windless day. "You're quite welcome here. I receive few enough visitors, even this close to town."

"I'm surprised," Alison said, coming to a halt near the garden's open gate. "It's lovely around here. Or it would be, if it wasn't for this fog."

"Oh, I don't mind the fog," the man said, looking around as if he could see shapes in the wisps. "It helps my work, I find."

"Your work?"

"Yes." He placed his hands on either side of his tightly clasped knees and lifted something thin and rectangular. Alison recognised it as a sketch pad, although she wasn't sure why she hadn't noticed it earlier.

"You're an artist?" She said.

"Vocationally?" The man shrugged. "Once. Now I draw only for my own pleasure."

"I'm surprised you can see enough to draw anything in this," Alison laughed, waving her hand to part the spider web tendrils that clung to the air.

"I rarely draw from life," the man said. "Quite the opposite, in fact." Before Alison could ask what he meant by that, he continued. "Would you like to see?"

"Very much so."

With a very slight nod, the man beckoned Alison to him. The gate opened soundlessly when she pushed it, leading onto a broken stone path which was gradually being reclaimed by the garden. As she approached the old man, she was aware of his clear blue eyes on her, the fondness of a favourite uncle held within. When she was close enough, he tilted his pad so that she could see what the graceful pencil lines there formed.

At the centre of the A3 sheet of paper was an ancient gravestone, so expertly rendered that Alison could imagine rubbing the fine moss that clung to its surface between her fingers. Around it, in pleated skirts and blazers, stood four girls, eyes wide with the prospect of adventure. Alison recognised the style immediately - she could have flicked to any image within her Friends Forever annuals and seen the same simple technique applied over and over again. She looked from the drawing to the old man's face. "I'm sorry," she said. "What did you say your name was?"

He smiled and took her hand. "My name is J. Bennett Stott."

"Mister Stott," Alison said, trying to shake his hand and fumble the book from her bag at the same time. "I've seen your work before, I'm sure. If this-" she flicked through the pages "- if this is you, then I'm a great fan."

Alison opened the annual to an episode of Sally Takes to the Skies. "Was this you? I mean, was this your work?"

Stott tilted back his head and looked along his thin nose at the pages she held open for him. After a moment, he creased his face into a thoughtful frown and nodded slowly. "Sally. Sally, Sally, Sally," he said. "Yes, she was one of mine. Quite the daredevil as I recall."

"I can't believe this," Alison said, flicking through the pages in search of more of Stott's work. "These strips - did you write them as well as draw them? - they've always meant so much to me, but of course you didn't get any credit so I never knew... Did you really work on all of them?"

"Most of them," Stott said, with a little nod either way of his head. "That was back in my days with Amalgamated Press. They had a lot of jobbing artists in AP, yes they did. Sometimes they'd come in and ask us to draw something for a boys' comic - a war scene or what have you - sometimes it would be picnics and playtime. And if they needed words to go along with the pictures, well, why pay two men when you can get one to do twice the work. Long hours, but you know," he winked, "That's what the view from the window is for."

"But you put such detail in to your pictures, so much care."

"I suppose I was good at what I did. May I?" He took the book from Alison and looked down at the illustrations. "And when it came to my girls, I'll confess to taking a little extra care. Now here's little Jessica - did she ever become a champion show jumper? I'm not sure they ever let me finish her story, but no doubt she's out there somewhere, still trying."

"I don't know," Alison said, watching Stott's fingers as they brushed slightly against the image he'd produced decades before. "I mean, I don't have a full collection. I'd love to, but you can only find them at market stalls and jumble sales, or in second hand shops. It's so difficult to track certain volumes down."

Stott closed the book and turned its spine so he could read the date. "1949," he said. "Not my best year. After that they started wanting all of the girls to have superpowers and fight crime. But that wasn't what the girls wanted. No, they were just normal girls, toughing it out. That's what you wanted, wasn't it? That was what you always wanted."

Alison wasn't sure if he was talking about the girls in the stories, or readers like herself. "No," she said, controlling a slight stammer. "No, I...

We... Didn't."

Stott frowned again, hefting the book in his hands. "1949, though. 1949. Yes, I suppose that's a safe one for you to have." He handed the volume back to Alison. "The ones you're missing... Let me see. '52? '53?"

"Both of those, yes."

"Hm. And others too, no doubt." Placing his pad down by the side of his chair, Stott planted both hands on his knees and pushed himself up. "Come inside, will you," he said. "I have something to show you."

Alison took Stott by the arm, but he was strong and stout as an oak, and shrugged her hand away without effort. He disappeared beneath the hanging vines and petals which surrounded the door frame. For a beat, Alison hesitated. Stott may be an old man, but he was powerful and alert, possibly capable of overpowering her if he put his mind to it. Then she thought of the girls in his stories, and the bold way in which they marched into danger, reliant on their smarts and their wits to get them out again. She stepped forward into the shade of the hall. There was no threat, and even if there was she would be more than capable of dealing with it.

The hallway was sparsely furnished, save for a few mountain landscapes hung on the wall and a small, ivory statue of the three graces which stood on a chest of drawers inset into an alcove near the front door. The main light was off, but from what Alison could see the passage appeared to run the length of the house. The doors on either side were securely closed.

"Of course there weren't any further editions of Friends Forever after 1955," Stott said as he made his way to the wooden door at the far end. "You knew that, didn't you? That was when Amalgamated Press closed its doors. Bless them, they tried to move with the times but they were just too bloody old-fashioned, if you'll excuse the profanity. All that crime and violence, those grotty city streets they wanted me to draw, superheroes. I put my back into it, don't think that I didn't, but it wasn't the same."

"You drew lots of war scenes, didn't you?"

An abrupt shrug spasmed through Stott's shoulders. "That was different. There was a grandness to that old history, a true heroism. It wasn't some girl in a leotard kicking a ruffian in the head." He turned back to Alison, his hand on the door knob. "My girls didn't fight. My girls didn't need to. They had intelligence, and grace, and the right attitude to get them

through life. Most of them did, at least.” Stott looked carefully at Alison, something like regret on his face. ‘Some... lost their way. But they always find it again. Eventually.’

He opened the door.

There was no grand reveal. No broad, dazzling studio, the walls papered with lost J. Bennett Stott masterpieces. Instead there was a narrow, tight room with a high window at the end. The filtered light from outside fell across a dark, wooden artist’s desk, on which lay a single sheet of paper. There was nothing on the white-washed stone walls, and the flagstone floor was uncarpeted. The room reminded Alison more of a cell than a studio.

Something swayed outside the window, the limbs of a tree Alison thought. Her eyes returned to the paper on the desk. She could just make out the pencil work on it, as indistinct as the world had seemed over the past couple of days. “You’re working on something new?” She said to Stott.

“Something old. Please, look.”

Stepping into the studio room, Alison was surprised at the warmth which passed over her body. The branches outside the window moved again, although, this time, she had the sense that they were leaning close against the grey panes of the window to see what happened next. Was that a high, girlish giggle she heard? She would have to check later. Her attention was fixed on the sheet that Stott had left out for her, the text and images of which were beginning to come together.

Across the top of the page, in the simple style she knew well from her annuals, was the title of the story: Alison, Alone. The remainder of the white space was divided into nine equal panels, which Alison read slowly. Together, they told the story of a girl in her early teens - the quintessential slim-limbed, wide-eyed waif of Stott’s work - wandering the streets of a sooty city rendered in oppressively heavy black lines and deliberately messy shading. In each panel she was being turned away from something or someone - an elderly couple, whose faces were familiar to Alison; a young soldier, who shooed her from his side as he climbed the gangplank of a military carrier; a Beano-esque professor who held his pointed nose high as he directed her far from his seat of learning. The girl took each of these rejections with the same cowed expression, head low, back bent, scuttling away. She had no dialogue, nothing to say in her defence.

As the panels progressed, the backgrounds and borders grew fainter until - in the last couple of scenes - only the girl herself could be seen, standing in a white void, an expression of abject sadness on her face. By the final panel, even she had been rendered in a soft hand, the lines of her arms and legs hardly there at all. Alison reached out to lift the page and see if there was any more of the story, but the sheet below was blank.

From behind her, still standing in the doorway, Stott began to speak.

"Alison, Alone was never the most popular of my stories. Too bleak, my editors said, and a bit too, shall we say, daring in its format. Personally, I always thought of it as a distillation of every one of the stories I pencilled for Friends Forever, but then who am I to say? It was allowed a few appearances within some of the omnibus editions - 1952 and 1953 are the two which spring immediately to mind - but no more. A shame, really, as it meant that no one ever had the chance to see how the story ended. My poor Alison, left hanging. It was always a great regret of mine."

"But this is me," Alison said, touching the page. "Those are my parents..."

"As you remember them, yes."

She turned to face Stott. He remained leaning against the doorframe, a look of gentle sympathy on his face. Alison opened her mouth to speak then closed it again. With one hand, she supported herself against the back of Stott's chair. When the artist realised that she wasn't going to speak, he continued.

"Of all my girls, you were always the one I was the most worried about. The others had their ambitions and their drive, but to you I'd given nothing but loneliness. When you left me - when you all left me - I hoped that you'd find your own place in the world, but it would seem I was wrong. Oh Alison, you're as lost as the day I sent you and your sisters away. I'm so, so sorry."

White space was creeping into the edge of Alison's vision again, and she leant more heavily against the backrest of the chair. Stott shuffled towards her, and she felt gentle hands guide her down into the seat. Nearby, she thought she heard the breathy gasps of several young girls, and looked up to see. Something quick ducked back beneath the window sill.

Stott's fingers were in her hair, stroking. "You've forgotten, of course you have. Don't worry, you're not alone in that. Your sisters, they'd all

forgotten by the time they came back to me. But you'll remember. It only takes a moment. There, there, my girl. There, there."

Head bowed, Alison looked down at her upturned palms, staring at the broad, white dough of her skin. For the first time in years she could see the nimble fingers of her youth beneath the gloves age had forced on her. She longed to tear them off to see if that girl still existed, but knew it was too late. She put her face in her hands and wept. Gently, Stott continued to run his hand across her head. Between sobs, Alison thought she could hear the sympathetic coos of the girls behind the window. She longed to look up, to see their faces, but she didn't want them to see her like this - old and broken. Instead, she turned her damp eyes to Stott.

"I'm still on my own," she said. "Even after all this time."

"Not anymore," the old artist said, taking her hand.

Stott's guidance was unerring. He wrapped Alison's thinning fingers around the pencil which lay on the desk. With slow, careful movements, he placed the tip of the lead against the paper then began to draw a solid border around the stranded girl in the final panel. When that was done, he took over completely, deft flicks of his wrist filling the scene with grass and trees and, finally, other girls, all gathered around Alison with delight in their eyes. Rapt, Alison watched the artist at work, only dimly aware that the fog beyond the window was beginning to clear up, revealing a garden the equal of the one Stott had rendered. Finishing, the old man stood back with his hands on Alison's shoulders and, voice little more than a whisper, said, "Welcome home, daughter."

The smile that crossed Alison's face felt out of place, but only because she wasn't used to it. Even the tears that ran across her smooth cheeks seemed new, born as they were from delight rather than despair. Breathing deep, she wiped her eyes and looked out into the garden. The air was clear, the skies cloudless. It was a day for adventure and discovery, laughter and triumph. Her sisters gathered at the window, their maroon blazers clean and freshly pressed, their tidy bobs held in place by hair clips and bands. With slim fingers they waved and encouraged her to join them, laughter chiming. Leaning forward in the chair, Alison reached out to touch the glass. The back of her hand was smooth, her own fingers as delicate as those belonging to the girls on the other side of the window. Alison closed her eyes. At last, she had found a place where she belonged.

Sacrament by Regina de Búrca

Tara Lynch was late for Morning Mass. She slid along the polished marble floors and ran to catch up with the rest of the first years. She cursed her new shoes – two sizes too big to last her the school year – as they clacked with each footfall. The smell of bleach and polish irritated her, forcing her to hold her nose so that she wouldn't give herself away by sneezing.

Her classmates disappeared around the corner, towards the Chapel. Tara smiled with relief when she turned into the hall - Sister Ignatius had already taken her seat.

She slowed down as she came to the dark stone doorway. The Chapel wall was one of the few remnants of the original convent, a survivor of Viking invasions and wars with the British. Sometimes Tara wondered if the nuns had survived for that long as well.

“Kyrie, eleison... Christe, eleison...” Droned Father Donnelly.

She had missed the Confiteor but she could say it herself later on. Her main concern was to sit down without being spotted. She tried to slip in to the last pew but she cursed her luck when she saw Mary Ryan sitting on the edge. When Mary saw her she smirked and tapped her watch. Tara stuck out her tongue at her before moving into the next row where her friend Áine made room for her. They smiled at each other.

“Lovely!” Whispered Áine as she glanced the hairband holding Tara's long, black hair in place. Tara glowed; it was a beautiful ribbon, the same deep green as her eyes. The same colour as her mother's, or so her father told her; she could never tell from the black and white photographs. Tara tried not to be sad and thought about the parcel her grandmother had sent instead.

It had arrived that morning. All the girls loved to see Tara get a parcel because house rules meant she'd have to share any food she'd been sent. Tara's grandparents owned the local shop in Belmullet and every month sent her a selection of the very finest produce. Today's parcel contained a fruitcake, scones, a tin of Emerald toffees, two Bunty comics and the ribbon.

Something sharp dug into Tara's back. She turned around to see Mary Lynch and Betty McHale snigger behind their hands. Betty whispered into Mary's ears and the pair erupted into peals of laughter.

Tara hated them. Easily a foot taller than the other girls in the class, she guessed they must have stayed back a year. At first she had thought they were sisters, they both had blonde hair and wore the same sly expression in their blue eyes, like they were laughing at you without moving their mouths. They were shaped differently – two women in a class of little girls.

"You two leave me alone or I'll tell!" Tara hissed. She could feel her face burning and her hands balled into fists. She'd love to bloody up that pretty nose of Mary's and then kick Betty's stupid bottom.

"Girls!" Sister Ignatius swooped down towards them. She moved her face so close to Tara's that the girl could see every line etched in to her paper-thin skin. "Tara Lynch! I have my eye on you!" Her breath smelled of the salmon fillets that Tara's grandmother would boil every Friday.

"It wasn't me, Sister -!" Tara looked into the nun's eyes. They were glassy and had yellow goo in the corners.

Sister Ignatius held up her hand, signalling the end of the conversation. "Remember where you are, please!"

Tara could feel tears forming. How could she possibly forget? She hated her father for making her come here. If he didn't want her, fine, but why couldn't he let her live with her grandmother?

"It's no place to send a young girl," said Granny to her father as she left for boarding school. "Amn't I after losing a daughter, and now you want to deprive me of a granddaughter as well!"

But nothing her grandmother had said or any of the tears Tara had cried during the drive from Belmullet to Galway had changed Tom Lynch's mind.

After Mass, Tara stayed seated until Mary and Betty left, just to be safe. Tara had no doubt she'd put up a good fight but she was bound to lose - they were so much bigger than she was. And there were two of them. She knew Áine would try her best to help but as Tara looked down at her friend she knew that her tiny frame was far better suited to studying in the library she loved so much.

"...and that is why I prefer Malory Towers books to St. Clare's!" Áine beamed up at her.

Tara smiled. Although she hadn't been listening she didn't want to discourage Áine from speaking— her friend was all but mute most of the time. “We should probably go. Class will be starting soon.” Tara linked Áine's arm with hers and they walked through the Chapel and out of the front door of the convent.

A chilling wind bit into her, forcing her to walk quickly across the grounds. Tara looked past the well-kept lawn. Chalky clouds hung low in the grey sky. An icy mist rolled like smoke towards the edge of the cliff on which the convent was built. She liked to remind herself that the crashing waves were the same ones that broke against the stony beaches in Belmullet; the thought made her feel like home wasn't that far away. But today the idea wasn't as comforting as usual and she felt tears prick her eyes again.

The girls took their seats moments before Father Donnelly strode into the classroom. He was the tallest man Tara had ever seen and built like the strongman she'd seen in the circus last year. Millie Douglas' mum said that he could have played football for Kerry, before he was moved here. Tara wondered if that was why he was grumpy all the time: was he thinking of the other life he could have been living? Should have been living?

The class stood up and blessed themselves as he said the first half of the Hail Mary in Gaelic. They chimed the eight line response and took their seats. In silence they opened their jotters as Father Donnelly opened the first volume of *The Annals of the Four Masters*.

The priest read a sentence at a time and they wrote every word down. He began pacing up and down the rows of desks. He paused when he got to Mary's desk, and smiled at her but she ignored him. He moved on and put his hand on Betty's shoulder. Tara could never understand why the bullies were also the teacher's pets. How could he not see how awful they were? They never had to answer any questions in class and she'd never seen them hand in any homework. It was so unfair.

Betty jumped as Father Donnelly touched her and didn't look up at him either. Tara clenched her jaw. They were even rude to a priest! She felt her face grow warm. Anger seemed to implode inside her. It stabbed her insides until Tara felt a sharp pain erupt. Her hand shot up and she blurted out “An bhfuil cead agam dul go dtí an leithreas?”

The girls giggled. The priest frowned and nodded, dismissing her. Tara glanced nervously at Mary and Betty but for once they weren't smirking

at her, they were just staring at the pages in front of them.

Tara ran to the bathroom. The pain inside her was increasing. Finally she reached the bathroom where she locked the door, sat on the toilet and hugged her knees. She started to cry as she felt like she was being kicked in the stomach.

The searing pain was such agony that she tried to change position to see if it eased off. She slowly lowered her legs to the floor. But it hurt to move.

Tara looked down to see blood between her legs. She took down her knickers and began to scream. Her insides were falling out! "Help me! I'm bleeding!"

Someone pounded on the door. Even though she felt like fainting from the pain, Tara knew she had to make herself decent. She covered herself up, sobbing as she saw the blood leach from her body.

Father Donnelly stood in front of her as she opened the door. The priest took in the scene with a sweeping glance, his face like stone. Unable to enunciate words through her cries, Tara held up a hand covered in blood. He backed away, closing the door behind him.

"No! Don't go! I'm dying!" Cried Tara. Had he gone mad? Couldn't he see what was happening? How could he just leave her like this? She was in agony; too much pain to follow him and try to make him understand. Make him help her. Shaking, she hugged herself into a ball. She thought of her family. Was this how her mother died? She pictured how sad her grandmother would be at her funeral and started to howl.

Just then, Sister Ignatius stepped into the room. "Keep quiet, girl!" She hissed. The nun bent down and slapped her face. "How dare you speak to a priest about this!"

"Wha- what do you m-mean?" Tara wondered now whether it was her that had gone mad. Was she the only one seeing the blood?

"Wait here and for goodness' sake, stop making so much noise!" The nun left the room.

Tara started to shake. She touched between her legs. The blood was still pouring from her.

The nun barged into the room moments later. "Put this on." Sister Ignatius handed her a thick piece of white spongy fabric. "It has hooks that you connect with this." She handed her a white cord.

“I -I don’t understand!”

“Stupid girl!” The nun slapped her on the arm and then roughly lassoed her with the cord. “You put the pad on and then tie it with this.”

Tara still wasn’t sure but she was too afraid to say anything.

“No mass for you until the bleeding has stopped.”

Tara thought of the Bible illustrations of Jesus healing the lepers. Was that what was wrong with her? Whatever had happened was unspeakable. But the nun had a bandage for it so she must know what was going on.

“Please, Sister Ignatius, what is wrong with me?”

Sister Ignatius stood up and pursed her lips. She wore a self-satisfied expression. “The wound between your legs has opened and you must pray to God to heal your unsanitariness. From now on you must now beg God to rid you of the evil you were born with. God sees and God knows.”

Tara cried as silently as she could. She was a monster.

Sister Ignatius hit her again. Harder this time. “Stop crying! Take some time to make yourself presentable and go back to your studies. And keep your mouth shut. I don’t want you scaring the other girls.” The nun fixed her with a glare of pure loathing and left the room.

Tara eventually worked out how to use the pad, even though her hands were shaking. She felt numb, like she was watching the whole episode on television. Like it wasn’t really happening to her. It felt like one of the bad dreams she used to have when she’d wake up screaming for her mother. But Tara knew enough to realise that this was no dream.

She cleaned herself up as best she could and then hobbled back into the classroom, each step more painful than the last. Everyone watched her as she walked in. She blushed.

Father Donnelly looked up from the book and then went back to reading and pacing.

Tara kept her head down. He stopped at her desk. She edged in towards the wall in case he hit her like the nun had. But instead he put his arm on her shoulder, just as he had done to Betty.

She looked up at him and she saw he was smiling. His eyes, which normally passed her over and were empty, now seemed warm and glowing. He had never paid her attention like this before. She smiled back at him, grateful for his reassurance. “Stay back after class,” the priest said quietly with a wink. He squeezed her shoulder and walked on.

Tara breathed out in relief. At least she was safe now.

Spiral by David Rix



Fragment from a page of the Conchological Review letters page, June 1998.

The air was easily the first thing that we noticed when we arrived at Svartavatn. Over everything hung a pall of faint scent – wiffs of rot and sulphur and less definable odours that I couldn't identify. I hadn't expected that. I knew it was a volcanic lake, but I hadn't expected the sheer physicality of that air. It wasn't entirely unpleasant – it was powerful and earthy, maybe even somehow primal. But even so, it was like walking into an alien atmosphere that was just a little thicker

than it should be.

Somehow, even in those first few minutes, that air made hard work harder and muted the flurry of activity as we dragged our stuff from the helicopter. It didn't help that my legs still felt wobbly from such an unfamiliar mode of transport, and Lydia also looked a bit unsettled; for the moment we just dumped the equipment into a pile. The pilot gave us a wave

– I remember that – then lifted off and abandoned us. We both stood watching the craft go. It all seemed very casual – just a quick goodbye and the roar fading away like the thing itself until it was just a dot in the sky. And there we were – alone and hopefully self-sufficient somewhere deep in remote Iceland.

Lydia rubbed her face and gave me a brief resentful look, which I was left to try to analyse in silence as she turned away. She had been doing that increasingly lately, since we arrived in Iceland. I gave a small and weary sigh, wondering why – and remembering how eager she had been to accompany me on this bizarre trip. But her back was uncommunicative and I gave up. For a long while, we just lingered and stared at the scenery – putting off the boring task of getting the tent out and erecting it. And indeed, the scene demanded our attention. It was not that Svartavatn was overtly strange – it was no fantasy landscape, at least not here in a land filled with fantasy landscapes. On some level you could even have called it insignificant – little more than a dark crusty looking pool of about a hundred feet across lurking in a low-lying area, surrounded by rough rock and scrubby grass. But there was still something about it that made you stare – something about it that marked it out. The whole lake steamed gently in the cool Iceland summer air, sending otherworldly streamers of mist drifting over the surface and, when we descended to the water's edge and reached down to touch, the warmth was pleasant. Through its dark-stained water, the rocks were clearly visible, but highlighted in a murky but vivid orange. Around the edge was a layer of light brown encrustation, encasing both the rocks and the dead vegetable matter – a dull crystalline growth laid down by the water as it cooled and evaporated. It glittered slightly in the low sunlight. In the shallows, there was a mess of scum and mats that looked like a dirty garden pond but here made me think of extremophile bacteria and exciting scientific discoveries.

Of course, I am not exactly a scientist – nor is Lydia. Let's get that cleared up right away. This is not exactly a scientific expedition. I am an amateur conchologist – an obsession with shells – and I have a certain working knowledge of the natural world. Lydia's obsessions covered volcanism, which was even more appropriate here and even less professional. When we first heard of this lake, with its hot volcanic water and vague references to shells, it jumped out as a perfect obscure and fitting

place to visit as a break from normal life. Way off the beaten track – way out there away from civilization and etc etc. Looking around at this strange lake, I was beginning to wonder if anyone else had ever been here and taken a close look at it before.

I stole a glance at Lydia and registered the glitter in her eyes that had wiped away any sullen expression.

“Well?” I murmured with a smile.

“This place is amazing,” she said. She seemed to be smelling the air as though it was an old lover – tasting the volcanic gasses. Then she bent, scooped up a handful of water and took a sip, spitting it out inelegantly and pulling a face.

“Shall we go for a swim?” She asked with a bright smile. “You going to join me?”

I glanced without enthusiasm at the pile of supplies that was still awaiting our attention – practicality warring with self-indulgence – then shrugged and grinned. There was still plenty of the day left after all. Aside from the scummy edge, the water did look rather inviting. Substantially deep and warm in this cool Iceland air.

“Yes,” she said. “I promised myself that the first thing I would do when we got here is to go for a swim. That’s the best way to say hello to any water body. Just it and your skin.”

She didn’t waste time – simply kicked off her clothes and splashed into the lake, wincing at the rocks underfoot.

“It must be full of minerals,” she said happily. She sat down and scooted herself out into deeper water, favouring her arse against the rough crystals. She lay back and floated. “I feel very buoyant,” she said. “I think this is slightly denser than usual.”

I joined her and we relaxed, surrounded by steam.

“Some other mineral springs have dark and strange tasting water like this,” she said, swirling it. “There’s a black mineral spring down in Slovenia – Moravske Toplice, or something – that people think is almost magical. Maybe this place also has health benefits. I must get some samples.”

I felt the water swirl around my legs, as though subtly thicker than water usually is, and tried to work out whether it was pleasant or not. But then – since when did healthy things equal pleasant things? As we drifted

further out into the lake, the temperature increased, radiating up from below until it was just verging on painful. Below us, we could see the orange-stained rocks descending into the dark water until hidden and I realised that the lake was actually quite deep – deeper than we could see or feel. Below our feet was nothing and I began to get a slight eerie feeling, imagining the water far below, superheated and raging among the hot rocks – black and unknowable. As though at any moment my feet might be boiled by a geyser or we might be suffocated by an eruption of gas.

I gave a laugh. “I think I will get out and start putting things together. I’m feeling rather dreamy.”

“Ok,” she said. “I’ll come with you.”

As we splashed to the shore, I thought I saw a small red dot moving through the water – the first sign of moving life here in Svartavatn – but when I tried to focus my attention on it, I couldn’t find it. I spotted something else lying in the shallows though – almost as though it had been pointed out. It was a shape that caught my trained eye in a moment and I darted down and grabbed it. It was a shell – broken but obviously part of a large water snail, several inches long at least. I turned it over quickly, pleased to have found something in my own area of interest so soon. The size of this thing was pricking at me and Lydia stared with interest.

Sometimes, when you work with nature – even an amateur scientist like myself – instinct can play a very large part. Of course, instincts have to be backed up with some very rigorous checking and research that can take years but sometimes things can happen very fast – when you see some insignificant looking fragment and you “Just know” in a split second that you have found something important. The thrill of excitement that you feel at that moment is not something that is easy to communicate – especially to people who have never felt it. If you can’t understand why the sight of this fragment of shell was like a slow electric shock that left my heart beating just a little faster than usual, then you will have to take my word for it – call me a nutcase if you like. You’re the one losing out.

“It’s a . . .” I hesitated. “It looks like a *Lymnaea* – like the common large pond snail. Or related to it. But it’s the biggest fucking *Lymnaea* I have ever seen – but . . .” I didn’t like to express the excited thought that had already germinated in my mind – that this could be a new species. But I had never seen or heard of anything quite like this before. “Look,” I said. “The

way the body whorl flares out – almost like an ear. And as far as I can tell, the spire is very concave . . .”

I stared eagerly at the water by my feet. “There must be a whole one here somewhere – even a live one. I would love to have a look at the anatomy.”

Lydia chuckled.

“I’ll have a look, shall I?” She said simply, only too keen to get back in the water.

She ran wincingly to the heap of equipment and unpacked a pair of goggles and a pouch, which she strapped round her waist. Then she splashed back into the lake, gave me a wry wave and disappeared under the surface.

I waited eagerly in the cooler shallows, but soon started shivering. The summer air was warm for Iceland, but still pretty chilly after that hot water – and I quickly scrambled out and shook off as much as I could, rubbing myself down with my trousers and getting dressed.

There was a splash in the lake as Lydia came up for air and dived again. Then, a short while later she appeared in the shallows. She scrambled excitedly out of the lake, her skin looking pink all over, waving a massive shell. Almost five inches long and a beautiful polished brown – and alive. I took it, almost dropping it in my excitement.

“It’s incredible,” she said breathlessly. “The visibility is quite good – dark water but clear, like a herb tea. But I can’t see any bottom to that lake. It’s just like a funnel – it curves away down until it is so dark that I can’t see anything. It’s fucking hot though.”

She brushed at the shell.

“And these things are all around, once you get a bit below the surface.”

I looked at her curiously. When she was this excited and happy, she just seemed to blossom, leaving any traces of her earlier bad mood far far away.

“And something else,” she added, grabbing a second specimen from her pouch. It was a bivalve – one empty shell, looking somewhat like a large Zebra Mussel – several inches long.

“Lydia,” I said flatly, “I love you.”

She gave a high pitched giggle. “You only love me for my snails,” she said with a pout and I gave her a mock slap. Then she hunched up with a shiver and hugged herself. “Oh boy,” she said. “The contrast is cruel. I’m f-f-freezing now.”

I hustled her back to the pile of equipment. “Fine scientists we are,” she said with a shivery laugh as we rummaged urgently for a carefully packed towel, then I began to rub down her pink and goosepimple body as fast as I could.

Later, we set to unpacking the tent and sorting out our equipment – the small heater and stove, our supplies of food, our equipment for collecting and analysing specimens and samples etc. Several large books on molluscs. The boring, mundane stuff of camping. Then, from her personal bag, she grabbed the small wooden recorder that travelled everywhere she did. She put it to her lips and blew a smooth but intricate phrase – the instrument’s clear high tone ringing out eerily across that black lake. The notes coiled across the low Iceland landscape seeming very much at home here – miles from civilisation.

She had been a quiet and unobtrusive musician ever since I had known her – sometimes classical music, sometimes more unusual and experimental stuff. There is often an ideal in music that it gives a true glimpse of the person behind it. This is not necessarily true – music can be as shallow or as deep as anything else – but in her case I liked to think it might be. It was beautiful and very melancholy – riven with a deep sad streak right through it. When I first met her, that sadness was already in residence and she never did really tell me where it had come from or much about her past, even when I asked. I didn’t know whether it was the product of some earlier trauma or simply an inherent and natural fragility in the face of the pressures of living.

For a few minutes, she forgot all about helping me with the tent and stood there on a rock enjoying the sounds she was making. Then I set up the stove and began cooking a basic meal and the smells quickly got her attention. After we had eaten, we sat quietly in the tent, trying to reconcile the bright daylight outside with our body clocks that emphatically told us ‘evening’. That was another thing that we had known about intellectually that still managed to surprise us in reality. Lydia still had her recorder in her hand. She sat over a sheaf of music manuscript, working on a composition

and occasionally blowing a few notes while I immersed myself in details of mollusc anatomy. It was not without a throb of guilt that I had killed that *Lymnaea* specimen – I didn't normally like to operate in this way – but my drive to find out was tremendous now and I had to know what it was, not just speculate. Poking delicately through the snail's organs and anatomy, I still had not been able to match it to any species I had data for, which meant either of two things: It was a stray colony of a species from a very long way away – outside Europe – or it was indeed completely new.

In spite of my excitement, I had a slight headache now and I cursed the limited range of food we had brought. It was all very professional – high energy bars, specially formulated drinks, stuff that could be heated up in our little saucepan containing all the proteins, vitamins and minerals that the body needed to perform at its best in the great outdoors – apparently. But even so . . . There was nothing that could really be called a meal. It's the fundamental flaw with scientifically prepared survival or diet foods like this: they may feed the body but they leave the soul starving. I was suffering withdrawal symptoms for good meat and vegetables, I decided with a smile. And I would quite happily commit a minor crime to get some fresh fruit.

Eventually, I put the *Lymnaea* aside and sat back with a yawn. Then slid under my opened sleeping bag, enjoying the feeling of stretching out.

"Well?" Lydia asked, putting down her recorder.

I shrugged – deliberately casual. "I need to check – and then recheck – and then check again. But I think this could be a new species."

She settled down beside me.

"Congratulations," she said softly. I gave a laugh. It's what any naturalist dreams, of course – finding something new and announcing it to the world. And I cautioned myself not to get excited. So many new species turn out to be nothing of the kind. Nature is infinitely more subtle than our neat and precise methods of cataloguing. But even so – a description is a description. Physical properties are physical properties. You can't argue with that.

I stroked her hair – then my own. The water of the lake had done it no favours, I realised. It felt coarse and heavy and sat on our heads like a dirty mop. That didn't matter though as we cuddled together, comfortably bundled up under the sleeping bags.

"I shall name it *Lymnaea lydiae*," I murmured.

“Awwww,” she said. “I’m not sure I deserve that.”

I kissed her.

“My head is really aching,” she said.

“Sorry,” I murmured, backing away.

“Bollocks,” she said with a smile. “Don’t you know what one of the best cures for a headache is? Whiney sods who use that as an excuse should be spanked. Hard.”

I was also not feeling 100 percent and a part of me wanted to wonder why. Were we doing something wrong here? We were hardly experienced campers after all. Or was it just a mixture of the strange air and our helicopter ride? But the nice glow of companionship soon drove it from my mind. It had been an exhausting day after all and I was quite happy to let myself wrap around Lydia in a warm tangle and pretend it was night.

Sleep though, when it came, wasn’t exactly restful. I found myself turning over and over in a slow cartwheel – a spinning vertigo that wasn’t quite sleep. Unsure which way was down, unsure whether I was awake or dreaming. And all around was that dark water and the orange-stained rocks .

..

Next morning, we found Svartavatn’s second potentially new species rather more directly – when it bit Lydia on the leg. She was wading in the warm water in her sandals when I spotted a small red dot on the back of her calf . . .

Once a couple of years ago now and back home in England, an incident occurred that I always remember. A Lydia I then barely knew was lying sprawled out on a rock with her scruffy jeans rolled up to her knees and her feet trailing in the water. This was Dartmoor – a small reddish stained pond lying hidden among the rocky slopes.

“Um,” I said. “Do you know that there is a 12 centimetre horse leech just by your foot?” I asked. She just glanced at it and gave me a lazy smile. Of course, it wasn’t dangerous and probably wasn’t interested in her at all, but her complete and utter lack of reaction to that swimming S always stuck with me. I don’t know or care anything about stereotypes, but I am sure that not many of the people I have known would have reacted like that.

“Just thought I would mention it,” I said, and reached into the water and scooped it up, where it promptly attached itself to my hand. Not biting –

merely engaging in battle with its mysterious assailant. I looked at it with interest, deciding then and there that on some weird level I quite liked leeches. They were curious creatures – on the one hand so simple, on the other very well aware of what they were doing and very efficient. With neither Lydia nor the leech aware of it, the three of us had just formed some kind of mutual bond right there that would never really be broken again, no matter what happened. Even if I had never seen Lydia again, that bond would have remained – the way faces sometimes come out of the crowd at you, even for just a few seconds, and make an impression that lasts a lifetime.

I tried to shake the horse leech back into the pond, but it still wouldn't let go – remained clinging to me until I simply held my hand still and let it swim away of its own accord.

The reason I mention this now is that it helps explain why her reaction to that red dot on her calf rather took me by surprise. She twisted round and glanced at it, then gave a kind of whoop and slapped at it furiously, just about turning in a circle in the process. Then she came stumbling out of the water in a rush, looking more unsettled than I could ever remember seeing her before. She ended up standing on the bank, breathing heavily and staring hard at the lake.

“You ok?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she muttered. “Sorry – I am feeling a bit highly strung this morning.”

She gave a dark frown and turned away sharply, making her way back to the tent. I stared after her then glanced into the water. I realised that there were a few other red dots drifting there and I caught one in a specimen jar and held it up to the light. And finally what it was became clear. It was a water mite or something very like one. A large one, though still barely 7 millimetres across. It seemed little more than a furry red sphere with a cluster of furiously paddling legs at one end. I looked at it, feeling bewildered. I had never heard of anyone being bitten by a water mite before – but then, we were a long way from home.

I quickly followed her and found her sitting in the tent looking glum.

“It felt as though it was sticking a needle into me,” she said. “And the needle was taking root and spreading into a whole network of tiny needles. Not really painful – it just . . . Felt strange.”

“Nerves,” I said. She gave me a sharp look.

“What?”

“Nerves – reacting off each other and sending sensations flashing all through you. Pain seems to come from all sorts of illusory places. Right?”

“Oh I see. Yes – something like that.”

She squirmed round, trying to see her leg and I leaned forward.

“There’s nothing to see,” I said. “I can’t even find a mark. Does it feel of anything?”

“No,” she said. “Nothing now.”

She gave me that dark look again – leaving me to guess at what specifically was upsetting her and what, if anything, it had to do with me. The she stood up and reached for her recorder.

“I’m going out for a bit,” she said shortly. “Just a little –”

I nodded vaguely and watched her go. Then, a minute or two later, the delicate sounds of the instrument came drifting back from the distance. It seemed unusually eerie now – little fluttering phrases and long winding note sequences that seemed filled with unusual and out of tune pitches. One curious little two-note sound seemed to reoccur – just a little descending sound that was half way between a bird call and a sigh. It would call out over and over through the glowing evening – and in some strange way it sounded like a communication.

I gave a sharp sigh and lay back on my sleeping bag. I also was feeling a bit fragile – my headache was still there – so it was hard not to be upset. Dark moods had been an occasional presence as long as I had known her and they were certainly a communication of some kind – but on a level I was not used to. Maybe a language I never really learnt. Love is a viciously strong force and it is defined by the sense of connection it brings – and awareness. A total awareness of all the layers and complexity and contradictions and mind games and manipulation that naturally form a part of human behaviour. And yet, beyond that is an equal awareness of the basic human isolation. Love only highlights the fact that even the most intimate contact is miniscule in the face of the huge distances between people. The isolation between human beings is like vast voids filled with impenetrable blackness. A blackness through which you might just occasionally glimpse a faint winking light. Whatever lay at the heart of that blackness was a mystery that you could never touch – even though that came with the

awareness of your own blackness that surrounded you yourself – your own winking light that no one could ever see. Other people are a mystery and unknowable – and the only way you can survive life is through some kind of selective blindness to that fact.

These were gloomy thoughts but familiar ones. In spite of my excitement at all that this place offered, even then it flashed through my mind for a moment that it would be nice to get away from here again and go home. Such a thought was faintly dismaying, especially when I glanced at the massive shell she had found – but hey, human is human.

Reminding myself that there was no sense brooding, I turned to the water mite that was still swimming inside my specimen jar. At this scale, it was extremely cute – little more than a fuzzy red ball moving purposefully through the water. It looked like some kind of mascot from a Japanese kids cartoon. But why had it bitten? Was it an aggressive or defensive bite? Was it a blood sucker? That made little sense because there was little for it to suck here when there were no lonely scientists visiting. I wasn't an expert on Hydrachnidae so I would need to do some serious checking before I could tell what it was. New species? Who knows? But I could fantasise. Isolated specific environments like Svartavatn often do lead to new species after all. And if it was, as part of me inevitably hoped, then I could name that as well. So I tentatively christened it *Lamiapilosus*, which means Hairy Vampire. And as to the second name, there was only one possibility. *Lamiapilosus lydiae* – what else? I added the name to the description I was formulating in my mind. Then there was a sound behind me and Lydia came in again and sat down. I was surprised to see that she was soaking wet under her clothes.

“Do you want to eat,” she asked shortly, with what looked to me almost like hate in her eyes, and I saw her absently rub at her leg. I gave a sharp sigh. No I didn't want to eat – not now.

“Are you alright?” I asked softly. “Is something wrong?”

“Yeah – I'm fine.”

“Then why are you looking at me like that?” I asked – still very gentle. She gave me a sharp glance.

“Like what?”

“As though you hate my guts for some real or imagined reason.”

She stared in silence for a moment, while I tried to read her face, waiting for some sign of surprise or indignation. But in the end she just sighed.

“I’m sorry,” she said abruptly, “I’m not sure I like this place.”

“You mean – the air? The strange atmosphere?”

She sighed again.

“Maybe,” she said – as though the simple effort of answering was just not worth the trouble. In the end we just subsided into a quiet where the only sound was the ticking of the little heater and she curled up in her sleeping bag and appeared to go to sleep.

Later though, as I was lying in a restless and faintly dizzy half-sleep myself, I felt her beside me and her arms were snaking round my neck and chest. I turned sharply but she just buried her face under my chin.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, and I was startled to see tears in her eyes.

I hugged her tightly.

“I’m being horrible. I was just feeling – so totally rough and fed up – headache. I just . . .”

She gave up as though realising the uselessness of words like that.

“Something in me feels broken,” she said at last. “As though it cracked years ago. Long before I ever knew you. And I can’t put it together again.”

She stared at me for a moment as though imploring me to rescue her from something. As though all she really and truly wanted was for me to open up her head and cut out the part that was hurting her.

I really wanted to. But I didn’t know how. And that lack of knowledge hurt like a knife blade in my own brain.

Next morning – as far as it was ever morning in this place of near-constant daylight and heavy-scented air – she awoke me again when she shifted and sat up.

“Oh boy,” she muttered sleepily, trying to rub the exhaustion from her eyes. “Dreams.”

I glanced at her, but she said nothing more, simply scrambled out of her sleeping bag and exited the tent, not even looking at me. I stared after her. I couldn’t recall ever seeing her this moody before, and frankly it was giving me a creeping feeling that something was wrong. Seriously wrong.

Maybe it was paranoia or maybe not, but this isolated wilderness was no place for drama.

I didn't follow her. If she wanted to be alone then she had better be alone. Instead I just busied myself with mundane stuff. I began making a detailed analysis of the Zebra Mussel shell. The inside of the shell was smooth but I could just make out the adductor mussel scars and these seemed to correspond dead on with the common and widely distributed Zebra Mussel *Dreissena polymorpha* – just unusually large and somewhat twisted and rough, as though with age. In the end I put it aside, feeling unexpectedly bored with it. Zebra Mussels were common enough – enough to be a nuisance sometimes. And as to why this one was so large, I wasn't even very interested.

In the distance, the call of the recorder came again – just that familiar two-note sound. She didn't seem to be playing anything else now – just calling over and over. There was something desperate about it – as though each call was saying "Please answer" – "Please answer". For a moment I wanted to answer myself – in the hope that my answer would be of some relevance. But then, in the corner of the tent, I spotted the pages of manuscript that she had been working on and I picked them up, hoping for some insight. I was not very good at reading musical notation but I could clearly see that there was something bizarre about this – it was not quite her usual style. There were no barlines – no time signature. And even the meanings of the notes themselves seemed to be skewed. There were curiously shaped noteheads that must have some specific meaning, but it was not explained. Vaguely scribbled lines criss-crossed the staves. And rough written sentences – Pain and darkness. Deeper and deeper. As red and blue is water. Crystal fluidity.

I sat back, trying to remember if this was a new piece or one she had been working on before. One thing I could make out though were two notes – just two quavers – that seemed to repeat at odd moments throughout the pages, and I wondered how these corresponded to the sighing calls she had been making. Lydia's bird call – if there had been any birds around here to talk to.

I put the papers back and left the tent – and the moment I did, like a bubble bursting, the calling stopped. I stared round at the landscape but for a while there was no sign of her. Then I spotted a white shape in the lake

and felt a thrill of shock. For a moment I really thought she had drowned there. She was lying motionless in the water, naked – her body gleaming pink through the clear dark liquid. Her recorder was half-submerged on her chest and her hair flowed out and down into invisibility below. There was a tension in the air – almost like some inaudible musical note still playing.

I hurried to the lakeside, calling her name, but I got no response.

A few of the red mites were patrolling the water around her, I realised – a few on her skin . . . Sucking. How long would it take for these things to suck a person empty, I wondered – which was a stupid question. The answer was far far longer than she had been missing of course, if indeed it could ever be physically possible. But even so – the eerie black steaming water and the mineral growths, her so beautiful body and these orbiting red dots had a weird and almost unearthly quality to them that kept me silent for a moment.

I called to her a second time – then gave a groan and began stripping off whatever extraneous clothes seemed appropriate, splashed in and started swimming.

She gave me a brief glance then resumed staring at the sky. I stared at her, feeling an increasing dread. She looked as though she was in another world – barely conscious and totally zoned out. Then, without any ceremony at all, she sank beneath the surface. I watched her form fading down into the dark, feeling a freezing sensation somewhere in my stomach; she blew one rush of bubbles, then nothing. I made a wild grab and fortunately caught her hand, yanking her back to the surface. She hung there as though dead. Was she even breathing?

I towed her to the bank. She made a faint sound of protest – then a sharp cough shook her, spraying water from her mouth. I saw the rough mineral growths jar against her skin as I tried to pull her out, but even that didn't get a reaction and I half dragged, half carried her back towards our tent. Her skin looked red and raw from the heat but the thin claggy feel of the water gave her an almost slimy feel. I placed her on her sleeping bag – and she abruptly flopped over onto her face, coughing and spraying out more fluid. I checked her mouth, but she appeared to be breathing normally now.

Somehow, through all this, she was still clutching her recorder.

I began rubbing her down, trying to still the goosebumps that blossomed all over her skin. She flinched away though and I hesitated.

“Don’t” she snapped, and I withdrew hastily.

She sat there shivering and breathing heavily, staring into space.

“What happened?” I demanded.

She gave me a shaky look.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “Nothing – why would anything happen? I just went for a swim.”

“But you were . . .”

I suddenly felt uncertain. Had I over-reacted somehow?

“Are you sure?” I asked stupidly. She didn’t even answer, just slowly and shakily rolled onto her side. I moved the heater nearer to her and sat back, watching her anxiously.

“There’s something down there, you know,” she said at last.

“Down . . . There?”

“Just a basic scientific deduction. I mean think about it – those mites must have something to feed on. There’s something living right down there in the deep part of the lake – something very big. I mean – very . . . Very big.”

“That lake could never support anything large,” I said hesitantly. “What sort of thing are you referring to? Maybe there are fish in there for the mites to feed on? Or . . .”

“I’ve seen it,” she said dreamily. “It stretches as far as you can see.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I remembered my own dreams of turning and turning deep in that water. The unknowable warm depths.

It was a fitting fantasy.

“And you,” she said, “need to leave me alone.”

“What?”

“Taking advantage of me,” she said. “Forcing yourself on me when I am sick – not very nice.”

I stared at her – too shocked and frightened to be angry at that. She sat up again staring blankly at the tent flap – then she was scrambling up onto her hands and knees.

“Wait,” I cried, catching her hand. I hauled her back and she came pliant enough – without any resistance.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“I need to go,” she said dizzily. “I need to go and swim . . .”

I felt her forehead for signs of a temperature, but instead she felt cold. Cold and clammy. I glanced at the heater but it was on maximum.

Then she abruptly rolled over and curled up into a foetal position.

“Oh god,” she wailed, tears standing in her eyes. I reached out a hand to comfort her – but she flinched away.

“Look,” I said. “We’ve got a day left before we are out of here. Please – just take it easy till then.”

She gave me a stare that made me flinch.

“Ok,” she said shortly. “Ok – I’m fine. Really.” She clutched the sleeping bag round herself. I drew a deep breath and backed out of the tent – urgently needing some fresh air – as far as any of this air could be called fresh. I stared at the lake, feeling as though that black water of Svartavatn had cast a spell over us both.

As I stared, there was a heavy swirl out on the surface. I couldn’t see much, but something had shifted out there. Maybe something alive – maybe some bubble of volcanic gas. Maybe I was just dreaming. I wish I knew. I really wish I knew.

I sat down beside the silent Lydia, thinking furiously. I was scared now – really scared. It was hard to be coldly scientific under these circumstances. My head was painful and swimming, but I had to focus – had to work out what was going on. Maybe it was the bite. I considered that carefully. Could she have been infected with something from that little mite? I grabbed up the specimen jar and stared at it, my hand trembling, but that little fuzzy sphere told me nothing. She seemed physically normal – I could see no sign of any sickness or fever. She just lay still under the sleeping bag, the fabric rising and falling as she breathed. If it wasn’t for everything that had just happened, I would think she was perfectly normal.

Somewhere – from the distance or from the depths of my brain, I could hear those two notes calling again – over and over. Some audio ghost in my own head. I clutched my clothes to myself and stared at the heater. It was on maximum but I could hardly feel it and I buried my head in my hands. I was trying to count the hours now – even the minutes – until the helicopter was due to return for us. It wasn’t long by normal measure but it promised an eternity of sleepless staring and hope. Hope that she would just recover from all this – just be ok. It was a time for bitter regrets that we had ever

come out here that went round and round until I wanted to scream them – pointless and irrelevant though they were. If anything happened, the fault would be mine of course. Not so much for anything I had done or not done, but for that old fundamental inability to connect. That fundamental black void with the single winking light that you can never reach. How can you ever forgive yourself for that? What the heck was I doing? Trying to relate to someone or trying to look after some exotic creature from an alien habitat that had been dragged into the zoo of modern civilization, only to suffer?

A couple of hours later, she sat up again and made for the tent flap – and again I caught her hand.

“Where are you going?” I called. No answer, save for the sounds of Iceland – the wind in the rocks – those calling notes ringing over and over. But that was only a dream. Wasn’t it?

“Please don’t,” I begged uneasily. “What are you trying to do?”

I switched my grasp to her wrist and held her fast, then stood staring at her as she sat back down like a sulky teenager, her eyes full of hate.

And at the sight of that expression, I felt something shift ever so slightly in my own brain. “No,” I yelled, yanking her back violently and pinning her down. “Please . . . Just . . . Here . . . Wait . . .” Incoherent words and it was as though I was fighting with her – but she wasn’t fighting me at all.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I shrieked, drawing back my fist high in the air . . . Then letting it fall to my side.

After a moment, I bundled her right into her sleeping bag and zipped it up, trapping her inside. Then I grabbed a rope and, my hands still shaking so violently that I could hardly control them, wound it round her – trussing her up until I was sure that she wasn’t going anywhere and securing it with a fumbling knot. It felt almost ridiculous. It was a farce – a pantomime. A bad play of some kind and I gave a wild laugh. In that play I would now be the villain of course – and in some hysterical sense of liberation, I wanted to just let her go. Let her go and swim. Why shouldn’t she if she wanted? But I didn’t laugh long. The silence that settled after that outburst killed any humour. After watching her for a while to make sure she was safe, I fumbled among our supplies for the headache pills and swallowed a couple, then curled up and shut my eyes. But the whole pantomime just followed me into sleep and my dreams were only more intense now. Again that feeling of

turning over in a slow cartwheel – of floating downwards through some immense black tube, where light glimmered far below. Gigantic Zebra Mussels clustered all round – so large now that I could almost crawl inside one of those rough brown shells. As I watched, their pallid siphons contracted in unison and ejected clouds of white milk like a bizarre silent fanfare. And something moved far below. And through it all came the keening sound of Lydia's two-note phrase on the flute. Over and over – over and over. Would that sound never shut up?

I tried to call up memories. A year or so after our first meeting, after a long time of isolation, we finally came together with a bump. In those early weeks, she had guiltily asked me to sleep in her spare room – climbing in with me for ecstatic sex, then slipping off to her own bed. And even then giving me the occasional dark look and retreating into some hidden place, as though hating the necessity of forming connections with people even in the midst of happiness. Then coming back again, wild with an affection that defeated all paranoia. And we were happy. It was a wild time – a voyage of discovery. And not much had changed over time. As time passed, in spite of our sometimes skewed communication channels, a bond had formed of intense ferocity – even if the priest that married us had been a leech.

And I realised then that I had never actually told her about that.

From waking into dreaming into waking again – it was a repeating cycle. When I awoke, it was into a world of pain and deadly tiredness as my head throbbed. I tried to focus – but there was just a vague grey in my eyes and the sound of the wind and calling pipes. And even when I forced myself, blinking, I could hardly see anything but shapes and colours. And sleep was a respite. It was strangely peaceful in this cycle, for all the nightmares. Painful but static, with the passage of time having no meaning. No day. No night. No sun. No stars. Just a simple flat surface of time that seemed infinite and unchanging.

Finally though, during one indefinable cycle in the sequence, the realisation came that there was something missing and that jolted me up a few more levels in wakefulness. Her sleeping bag was open, the rope I had clumsily used to secure her was unravelled and, when I got a better look, I realised that there were traces of blood on them both. Feeling a sudden huge weight in my stomach – not unmixed with a little sense of inevitability – I

staggered to the entrance and peered out. A bright low sun of goodness knows what o' clock shone down across the empty landscape.

Just as before, like a bubble bursting, the music stopped.

There were more traces of blood on the rocks outside – in the direction of the lake. They came like a dream. I hurried in that direction, ignoring the rough rock under my bare feet – and a few metres further on I found the coat I had managed to get on her earlier. It was lying casually in a crumpled heap in the rough grass. I stared at it, feeling increasing panic.

Then a white figure – blurred, standing in the water. I gave a whoop. Then she was down and swimming out towards the middle.

There were no surprises now – this was pure inevitability. I didn't dither or have to engage in any internal dialogues. I just ran after her and splashed fully clothed into the hot water. I sprawled down, sending mud and minerals swirling in all directions, trashing years of crystal growth in a second. In a half-drowned tangle, I scrambled out of my coat and swam out awkwardly. Below me the lake bed vanished and I tried not to think about where I was – or just how deep Svartavatn might be. My eyes were burning – I could see nothing of Lydia now. No bobbing head. She had gone down like before, I realised. Sunk. The dark water had shut her off. I splashed out to where I remembered her to be and dived myself, bracing against the temperature. I could see little, as though I was swimming in black milkless tea, and I felt despair trying to get my attention from some lingering rational part of my mind. But I didn't pay attention to that – to the seeming impossibility of ever finding anything in this black water. I splashed up for another gulp of air, then plunged down again.

And then, there she was. I saw her. A white form floating in the water of Svartavatn. In some strange way, this was also inevitable and I didn't question it. I stared at her and tried to reach her, but she was still descending. I could see red dots orbiting her body like tiny planets and I knew what they were. When we first arrived, they hadn't been visible – now though they seemed to be everywhere. Maybe they were coming up from somewhere deeper in response to our activity. Now I was reminded of them, I realised that they were orbiting me as well. I hadn't even noticed. I even felt a few needle-like bites.

There were no bubbles coming from her at all.

Then she turned to look at me. I swallowed water in shock, choking on the acrid mineral taste. Had I imagined that? Or was this just humanity's inherent sense of narrative deluding my brain? It was not possible for Lydia to just float away. She must look back one last time. But not with those blank eyes. She must remember me . . .

But she just carried on drifting downwards, turning over lazily, hair streaming, and getting darker and darker in the dark water. Down below, I thought I could see flashes of light winking on and off in the black distance. I made a frantic effort to follow her but after a few more metres the vicious heat of the water got too much and I had to stop – self-preservation taking over control and sending me hurtling to the surface, to gasp some more of the heavy air and the glaring Iceland daylight.

Of course I went down again. And again. I kept diving as deep and as hot as I could bear, then struggling to the surface. I dived for over half an hour before I finally gave up and drifted to the shore. My body was burning all over. My head felt as though it was blossoming into a flower of pain and no matter how much I gasped in air, it didn't seem to refresh.

When I reached the crystalline rocks, I couldn't even climb out of the lake. I just lay in the shallows, rested my head on an uncomfortable nub. I more or less passed out. In my head, I could still see her descending away into the black water, while the red dots orbited. And lights winked on all round, revealing themselves to be the lights of windows and doorways in the wall of this volcanic tube. A vertical city that stretched away downwards forever. And through everything, that same peeping two-note call still rang out – like the voice of a bird from the depths of the earth.

I can't say much more. I have only vague memories now. Time passing. Colours. Shapes. Noises. A shocked helicopter pilot who hauled me on board. Questions. The next coherence was seeing the ground far below as the Iceland wilderness flowed past. And feeling fresh cold air, which I drank like wine.

“Where are we going?” I murmured.

“Reykjavik” the pilot told me. “Are you feeling better? What the hell happened?”

I wish I knew.

It was the air.

At least – that's what appears to be the case.

I should have known of course – should have realised that from the first day. There was something strange about that air. The air and the water of Svartavatn were both filled with strange scents – an alien heat and thickness. Later analysis of both revealed a slightly-poisonous volcanic cocktail that caused no little interest. Svartavatn is now on the scientific map and there is talk of a return expedition to take up where my ill-equipped trip and the crazy and useless recovery/rescue efforts left off. People want to know what is going on in the depths of that weird black lake.

As I lay dully in my little room in Reykjavik, my specimens were returned to me – the little *Lamiapilosus* mite, now dead in its bottle, the *Lymnaea* snail and the massive Zebra Mussel. I know that many people probably wouldn't understand, but these were a curious kind of comfort to me – that at least something had come out of that disastrous trip. In the end, they even caused some interest among those interested in such things. Sadly, my name *Lamiapilosus* got thrown out because the creature turned out to have relations to another genre of water mite-like creatures but in the end, somewhat to my surprise, my choice of last names was upheld for both. I don't think they had the heart to quibble. *Lydiae* was entered into the catalogue of life twice . . .

Needless to say, Lydia was never found. She's still down there somewhere.

My practical mind sees her with the flesh long since cooked from her bones by the intense heat lower down – slowly dissolving away to nothing in a place as inhuman as you can ever find, yet probably still supporting life of some kind. Extremophile micro-organisms all the way, revelling in the heat. The less practical side of me still wonders what she thought she had seen down there – that stretched as far as the eye could see. Another brief clue to a vision originating in that small winking light surrounded by blackness that you can never touch. And in my dreams and fancies she still drifts – and twists and turns and swims – and stares back at me forlornly from her new home where strange lights that might be doorways wink on and off in the wall of that deep tube of water – and where indefinable forms just maybe move with some kind of sentience.

When that expedition is put together at last to return to Svartavatn, I shall ask if I can go along – again, I don't think they would have the heart to refuse. I want to see that strange tube of water again. And I want to see just what lives in its depths.

Biographies

STEVE UPHAM(Our cover artist)

Steve Upham is a freelance artist and designer from South Wales. He uses both traditional and digital media for his work, with a particular focus on fantasy, sci-fi and horror themes. His artwork has been featured on many book and magazine covers by various independent publishers including his own press, **Screaming Dreams**, which can be found at <http://www.screamingdreams.com>

ALLEN ASHLEY

Allen Ashley is an award winning editor and author specialising in short stories in the SF/Slipstream/urban fantasy field. His most recent collection of stories is *Once and Future Cities* (**Eibonvale Press, 2009**), which was shortlisted for a British Fantasy Society award. His latest anthology as editor - *Where Are we Going?* - is due from **Eibonvale Press** in early 2012. Allen is also a well known commentator on music, football, literature and life. Check out: www.allenashley.com

RACHEL KEHDALL

Rachel Kendall is a writer and editor (**ISMs Press / *Sein und Werden***) living in Manchester with her partner of photographic things and her daughter of much-messness. The house is full of junk, dead things (some stuffed, others skeletal), books, a toy tea-set, a mannequin called Dallas, a few cameras, many DVDs, some broken crayons, and a clanger. Her short story collection *The Bride Stripped Bare*

(http://www.doghornpublishing.com/the_bride_stripped_bare.html) is available from **Dog Horn Publishing** and her novel *The Blush* will be published next year by **Black Coffee Press**. Visit her website: <http://www.kisstthewitch.co.uk/>

FARAH GHUZNAVI

Farah Ghuznavi is an international development professional and newspaper columnist. Her fiction has been published in the UK, US,

Canada, Singapore and her native Bangladesh. Anthologies featuring her work include *Woman's Work: Short Stories* (GirlChild Press, USA), *The Rainbow Feast* (**Marshall Cavendish, Singapore**), *Curbside Splendor Issues 1 and 2* (**Curbside Splendor, USA**), *Journeys* (**Sampad, Britain**) and *From the Delta* (**UPL, Bangladesh**). Her story *Judgement Day* received Highly Commended in the 2010 Commonwealth Competition, and another story placed second in the Oxford University GEF Competition. Farah is currently editing a fiction anthology for the Indian publisher **Zubaan**. Her website is: www.farahghuznavi.com

GARY FRY

Gary Fry lives in Dracula's Whitby. He's had a number of short story collections published, a chapbook, a handful of novellas and two novels. Ramsey Campbell has described him as "a master". His latest book is a Kingian novel called *Fearful Festivities* (**Screaming Dreams**) and forthcoming is a short story collection called *Shades of Nothingness* (**PS Publishing**). Check out all his activities here: www.gary-fry.com

MARK LYTH

Marc Lyth is an award winning actor and playwright living in Salford England. He is new to the story business and this is only his third published story. He is a black belt in Ju jitsu and an advanced first aid person. Other hobbies include breathing and avoiding sharp pointy things. He is running out of things to say here already so he'd better stop.

IAN SALES

Ian Sales has been published in *Jupiter*, *Postscripts*, *Alt Hist*, and the anthologies *Catastrophica* from **PS Publishing** and *Vivisepulture* from **Anarchy Books**. Currently he is editing the hard sf anthology *Rocket Science* for **Mutation Press**, due to be published in April 2012. He also reviews books for *Interzone*. He is represented by the John Jarrold Literary Agency, and can be found online at www.iansales.com.

KAT FULLERTON

Kat Fullerton lives in Calgary, Alberta and is a writer/producer, food fanatic and potential shoe hoarder. She likes funk music, rollerskating and

TV shows about murder, hoarding, cake or all of the above.

SHAY DARRACH

Currently living in Toronto, Canada, Shay Darrach is happily married to a partner of 14 years. By day, Shay writes help docs for enterprise-class software, delights in finding unexpected (and unreproducible) "features", and has been known to spread anti-productivity viruses of the mostly harmless kind. By night, Shay writes fiction, knits, or succumbs to the siren songs of certain browser-based RPGs. Shay's work has also appeared in *Crossed Genres Issues 12* and *20*, and in **Dagan Books'** *FISH* anthology.

SAMANTHA PORTER

Samantha is described by others as a Larry David style social assassin, who sees the funny side of all things dark and who speaks her mind freely with her diplomatic filter removed. Surrounded by a family of story tellers, jokers and lunatics she has an inexhaustible supply of material for her short stories and books. Her stories contain believable characters with a liberal sprinkling of insanity, wit and cunning that gets them into all kinds of trouble. She is currently working on her first novel, *Note to Self*, which she hopes to finish in 2012.

ROSANNE RABINOWITZ

Rosanne's novella *Helen's Story* will be released by **PS Publishing** later in 2012. Previous work includes another novella, *In the Pines*, which appeared in the award-winning *Extended Play: The Elastic Book of Music*. She has also contributed stories to *Black Static*, *Postscripts* and *Midnight Street* and anthologies such as *Conflicts*, *Never Again: Weird Fiction Against Racism and Fascism* and *The Slow Mirror: New Fiction by Jewish Writers*. She lives in South London, where she engages in a variety of occupations including freelance editing and care work – plus the occasional occupation of the local town hall.

STUART YOUNG

Stuart Young is a British Fantasy Award-winning writer. (No seriously.) His stories have been published in various magazines and anthologies such as *Alt-Dead*, *We Fade to Grey*, *Catastrophia* and *The*

Mammoth Book of Future Cops. (Hard to believe, but it's true.) He has also had three short story collections published to critical acclaim. (You can Google this stuff if you don't believe me.) His work has been praised by authors such as Mark Chadbourn, Brian Keene and T.E.D Klein. (Honestly, I am not making this up!) He also received the Nobel Peace Prize for leading the first manned expedition to Mars. (Okay, that bit was made up.) <http://stuyoung.blogspot.com>

TERRY MARTIN

Terry Martin is probably best known as the publishing editor of the quarterly anthology magazine *Murky Depths* and as head honcho of **The House of Murky Depths** and the YA imprint **Murkee**, publishing science fiction, horror and fantasy in prose and comics, but he's also a writer and an artist. His writings can be found in various publications, and he takes commissions for paintings, at very reasonable rates too, so we're told. His woefully neglected website is www.terrymartin.me.uk, and of course there's his blog at lucifal.wordpress.com and you can catch up with Murky business at www.murkydepths.com.

KELLY ROSE PFLUG-BACK

Kelly Pflug-Back grew up on an isolated farm in Ontario, where she spent more time talking to cows and chickens than to other people. She was first published at the age of 14 as a winner of This Magazine's Great Canadian Literary Hunt and her poems, journalism and short fiction have since appeared in piles of magazines and anthologies as well as having won a handful of awards. When her time isn't consumed by writing and school she likes painting, doing volunteer work and finding cool stuff in the garbage.

LORRAINE SLATER

Lorraine Slater is a respected, widely published author of erotic fiction written under another name, and a newcomer to the horror genre. In 2010, Lorraine's short story, *Cucko'*, was selected as one of the winners in the Campaign for Real Fear competition and was published in *Black Static* magazine. *Botched* is her second horror fiction appearance. She lives in Brighton, UK.

ANDREW HOOK

Andrew Hook has had over 90 short stories published in the independent press, with recent appearances in *Black Static*, *Morpheus Tales*, *Needle Magazine*, and *Art From Art*. His fourth collection of stories, *Nitrospective*, is available from **DogHorn Publishing**. He is currently looking for a publisher for a crime novel, *The Immortalists*. His website is located at www.andrew-hook.com.

NICOLE PAPIOANNOU

Nicole Papaioannou finds herself relating to the monsters in this book. On the surface, she is a serious academic, working towards a doctoral degree in English while adjuncting and tutoring part-time. Underneath the civilized young woman exterior, though, she is a nightlife fanatic, who thrives on house music and dancing into the early morning hours. She loves all forms of creative expression and chooses writing and photography as her own. Her poetry has been published in small undergraduate journals, such as Pace University's *Vox* and North Central College's *North Central Review*.

DEREK JOHN

Derek John lives near Cambridge UK. His stories have recently appeared in *Nemonymous 10*, *Arkham Tales* and *Sein und Werden*.

GARY McMAHON

Gary McMahon's short fiction has been reprinted in *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* and *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*. He is the British-Fantasy-Award-nominated author of the novels *Hungry Hearts* from **Abaddon Books**, *Pretty Little Dead Things* and *Dead Bad Things* from **Angry Robot/Osprey** and *The Concrete Grove* trilogy from **Solaris**. Website: www.garymcmahon.com

JESSICA LAWRENCE

Jessica Lawrence, born in the USA and currently residing in London, has been writing poetry for over thirty years. She has been published in numerous periodicals including: *Poetry Life*; *Ragged Raven Press* ; *Cinnamon Press*; *Peer Poetry International*; *Poetry on the Lake* and *The Sunday Times Magazine*. She reads her work regularly and emphasizes the

oratory aspects of poetry as an art form. Jessica Lawrence has taught creative writing in various schools and universities and has also pioneered programmes in health education for young people in the UK and in the USA. She is currently completing a thesis on literary pilgrimage and working on a multi-media retrospective of her life entitled *Semi-Colon*.

TONY LOVELL

So far Tony Lovell been published in *Supernatural Tales*, *All Hallows*, two editions of *Nemonymous* and *The Horror Anthology of Horror Anthologies* (for, which he also executed the cover art). Tony loves art and film and literature and not having too much explained to him.

TERRY GRIMWOOD

Proud editor of this book, author of numerous short stories, three plays (which he Directed as well) as well as *The Exaggerated Man* (**theExaggeratedpress**), *The Places Between* (**Pendragon**) and *Bloody War* (**Eibonvale**).

STEPHEN BACON

Stephen Bacon lives in South Yorkshire with his wife and two sons. He has been writing fiction for about five years, and has appeared in magazines like *Black Static* and *The Willows*, and the anthologies *Where the Heart Is* edited by Gary Fry, *Murmurations - An Anthology of Uncanny Stories About Birds* edited by Nicholas Royle, *The 6th and 8th Black Books of Horror* edited by Charles Black, *Alt Dead* edited by Peter Mark May, *Dark Minds* edited by Ross Warren, the final three editions of *Nemonymous* edited by D F Lewis, and many other books. His fiction makes up one third of *Ill at Ease*, together with Mark West and Neil Williams. Website: www.stephenbacon.co.uk

SARAH HILARY

Sarah Hilary is an award-winning short story author. Her fiction is published in *Smokelong Quarterly*, the *Fish Anthology*, and by the Crime Writers' Association (CWA). She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize for her story, *Flood Plain*. In 2010 she was shortlisted and Highly Commended in the Seán Ó Faoláin contest. In 2011, she received an Honourable Mention

in the Tom-Gallon Trust Award. Sarah regularly reviews short story collections for www.theshortreview.com, and blogs at www.sarah-crawl-space.blogspot.com. Her debut novel attracted the attention of literary agent, Jane Gregory, who signed Sarah as a client in 2010

MARK HOWARD JONES

Mark Howard Jones has had dozens of stories published on both sides of the Atlantic. His novella *The Garden Of Doubt On The Island Of Shadows* drew praise from Ray Bradbury among others. His collection *Songs From Spider Street* is now available from **Screamingdreams.com**. He lives in Cardiff, the capital of Wales.

JAMIE ROSEN

Jamie Rosen is the author of over two-dozen short stories, poems, and plays, and despite what you may have heard is neither a monster nor a girl. These and other half-truths can be found at <http://www.jrosen.ca>.

JOHN TRAVIS

John Travis has had 70 stories published in various magazines, journals and anthologies in *the UK, America and Canada, in places such as British Invasion, At Ease with the Dead, The Urbanite* and both *Humdrumming Books of Horror Stories*. He has two books out - one, a collection, *Mostly Monochrome Stories*, the other a novel, *The Terror and the Tortoiseshell*. He is currently looking for publishers for a further three collections.

JOHN FORTH

John Forth's short fiction has appeared in *Midnight Street*, the *Journal of the British Fantasy Society*, and *Estronomicon*, with further magazine and anthology appearances lined up for 2012. He currently lives and works in Brighton and can be stalked with impunity on Twitter at www.twitter.com/johnforth. For more information, visit johnrforth.wordpress.com

REGINA DE BURCA

Regina de Búrca is from the West of Ireland. She has a MSc. in Multimedia Systems from Trinity College Dublin and a MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University. A writer of novels for teenagers, she is represented by the Aitken Alexander Literary Agency. Her latest novel *The Girl with the Heart-Shaped Box* is a young adult mystery novel set in Dublin. Regina reviews books and writes articles for online magazines such as *The Future Fire*, *The Anti-Room* and *The Future Book*.

You can follow her on Twitter@Regina_dB or read her blog at <http://theapprenticestoryteller.blogspot.com/>

DAVID RIX

Writer and artist David Rix was raised in a small town, lived in the wilderness, and then descended on the city – a contrast he has been writing about ever since. His other published works include the novella *What the Giants were Saying* and, more recently, the collection *Feather*, which features more than its fair share of both girls and monsters in its own quiet way. These days, he and his large black hat can generally be seen haunting Kentish Town or Hackney rather than lonely moors or mountains. By and large, David gets on quite well with monsters, finding that a glass of wine and a chat tends to work better than stakes or silver bullets. www.davidjrix.co.uk

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